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The End of Engagement

*US Foreign Policy Towards China, From Obama
Through Trump*

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ENG4590 – Master's Thesis in American Studies

60 credits

Department of Literature, Area Studies and European

Languages

Faculty of Humanities

University of Oslo

Spring 2020

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Abstract

This thesis explores what the US foreign policy of the Obama administrations and the Trump administration towards the People's Republic of China has consisted of and discusses what the intention behind the administrations' policies were. It argues that the administrations have transitioned away from the policy direction of engagement with China which had guided the American approach to a rising China since the Richard Nixon administration, without arriving at a coherent alternative to replace engagement with. The history of engagement with China, intended to promote its participation in international institutions to the benefit of the US, is explored in order to determine why a rising China has grown more authoritarian and assertive instead of liberalizing its political system. The challenges of China's statist economic model, its increased military assertiveness and its attempts to exert influence independent of the US through the creation of Chinese-led infrastructure projects and institutions are among the issues that this thesis identifies as reasoning for the engagement strategy being phased out throughout the Obama administrations. The thesis finds that while the Obama administration did not completely abandon engagement with China, the focus of US foreign policy shifted towards deterring China from exerting its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. This contributed to the relationship between the US and China becoming confrontational when the Trump administration explicitly declared engagement to be over and brought unilateralism to the forefront of US foreign policy. The thesis finds that the foreign policy of the Trump administration was an incoherent combination of the deterrence prioritized by the Obama administration and a unilateral policy of economic competition aimed at improving trade conditions for American workers and businesses. The thesis concludes that China will likely become increasingly influential in the international system, and that the most feasible option for US foreign policy is to tone down the United States' ambitions of unilateral global leadership.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I want to express my gratitude to Mark Luccarelli, who supervised this project and was always remarkably quick to give feedback. I greatly appreciate your guidance on what to prioritize when tackling what seemed to me an endless amount of issues, theories, and more pertaining to my topic. Your words of encouragement throughout helped me gain the confidence to finish in time, and to be able to view this experience through a more positive lens. Thank you to Ingvild for not only tolerating being stuck with your severely stressed partner in these weird Corona times, but also for your empathy and understanding throughout the most challenging year of my life. Thank you to Bajos for emotional support, you were a good dog and I will always remember you fondly. A very special thanks to Magnus and Kristian for invaluable gaming sessions, and additional gratitude to Magnus for helping me proofread – I owe you one. To Tonje and Ingunn, thank you for great cooperation these past two years at Blindern: it has been great to be able to share both frustrations, enthusiasm and everything inbetween with you. I would also like to thank all my friends and family for being there for me, even as my brain was fixated on the US and China.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Topic

In 2001, China was admitted into the World Trade Organization (WTO), and subsequently witnessed a period of strong economic growth partly attributable to the WTO's 'low tariffs and open markets' safeguarded by the organization's 'reliable system of enforceable trade rules'.¹ The People's Republic of China (PRC) seemed to be in the process of distancing itself from the harshest tenets of Maoist China and instead opening up to the global community. For a long time, accommodating this transformation constituted the cornerstone of US strategy towards China: a strategy of engagement, derived from 'the assumption that deepening commercial, diplomatic and cultural ties would transform China's internal development and external behavior', according to Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner.² China's accession to the WTO seemed to be a validation of this strategy; a sign of great things to come for the US, for the liberal international order, and for a stable world of states interconnected by regulated trade and commerce. Fast forward to 2018: Amrita Narlikar tells us that '[t]he WTO seems to be whimpering its way to an inglorious end' amidst the beginning of a trade war between the US and China.³ What happened in the interim period to sway US foreign policy away from engagement with China, and to transform the dawning of a world of triumphant liberalism into a landscape of competition and uncertainty? To begin to explore these questions, the phenomenon that is China's rise in the 21st century is a central starting point; the oft debated upward trajectory of the PRC has attracted the interest of scholars, politicians, economists and a multitude of other disciplines and professions, and it is key to explaining the contemporary state of international relations and US foreign policy towards China.

Economic growth is one of the benchmarks that can be used to evaluate how substantial China's rise has been. Data from the World Bank and OECD shows that China's GDP in US dollars grew from 1.211 trillion in 2000 to 11.138 trillion in 2016, before making the impressive leap to 13.608 trillion in 2018: the US, starting at 10.252 trillion in 2000

¹ Amrita Narlikar, 2018, 'A Trade War on the Poor: How a Collapse of the WTO Would Hurt the Worst Off'. *Foreign Affairs*, 5 March. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-03-05/trade-war-poor> (Accessed: 5 December 2019).

² Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, 2018, 'The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations'. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(2): 60. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning> (Accessed: 9 September 2019).

³ Narlikar, 'A Trade War on the Poor'.

doubled this GDP figure by 2018, but did not match China's rapid rate of growth between 2016 and 2018.⁴ Whilst acknowledging that GDP does not necessarily provide a comprehensive overview of economic growth, the figures indicate that China's economy has been rapidly accelerating. The potency of China's state-centred economic model also suggests a challenge to the US and the Western world's conception of free-market economics: Stephen M. Walt points out that 'China's one-party state weathered the 2008 financial crisis well and continued to enjoy impressive levels of economic growth'.⁵ With a stronger economy comes the ability to pursue stronger military capabilities, and China has capitalized on this opportunity. According to Campbell and Ratner, China is ramping up:

Chinese President Xi Jinping has launched military reforms that will make Chinese forces more lethal and more capable of projecting military power well beyond China's shores. With its third aircraft carrier reportedly under construction, advanced new military installations in the South China Sea, and its first overseas military base in Djibouti, China is on the path to becoming a military peer the likes of which the United States has not seen since the Soviet Union.⁶

Not only is China in the process of improving its military capabilities, it is also projecting its power in the South China Sea, where 'it has ... seized contested territory or militarized artificial islands' among other ventures designed to 'change the security balance' in East Asia in its favour.⁷ In the area of diplomacy, China's prospects have also improved dramatically. As of 2019, China surpassed the US as the country with the most diplomatic posts on the Lowy Institute Global Diplomacy Index: a total of 276 worldwide, three more than the US.⁸ What is notable about this development, which Bonnie Bley points out, is that 'China's ascent to the top spot has been rapid', having trailed the US by '23 posts' eight years earlier.⁹ Why is China rapidly expanding its diplomatic presence, and could the trend continue? The political benefits for China are many: for example, the future of Taiwan remains one of the most

⁴ World Bank national accounts data and OECD National Accounts data files, 2018, *GDP (current US\$) – China, United States*. Available at:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2018&locations=CN-US&start=2000&view=chart> (Accessed: 28 November 2019).

⁵ Stephen M. Walt, 2018, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. 1st edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 43.

⁶ Campbell and Ratner, 'The China Reckoning', 67.

⁷ Campbell and Ratner, 'The China Reckoning', 68-69.

⁸ Lowy Institute, 2019, *Global Diplomacy Index: 2019 Country Ranking*. Available at: https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/country_rank.html (Accessed: 28 November 2019).

⁹ Bonnie Bley, 2019, 'The New Geography of Global Diplomacy: China Advances as the United States Retreats'. *Foreign Affairs*, 27 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-11-27/new-geography-global-diplomacy> (Accessed: 28 November 2019).

pressing regional issues in the Asia-Pacific. In September 2019, The Guardian reported that officials of the Solomon Islands ‘voted to sever its longstanding ties with Taiwan and take up diplomatic relations with Beijing’, in the wake of ‘Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, São Tomé and Príncipe, Panama and El Salvador’ having done the same.¹⁰ In sum, China has been rising at a fast pace since the 2000s to the forefront of economic, diplomatic and military capabilities, and it is also utilizing its improved standing to pursue its ambitions more assertively.

The critical question for this thesis to ask is what this development means for the US; and more specifically, how the rise of a great competitor in Asia has affected the shape, direction and execution of its foreign policy. A notable instance where China was brought to the forefront of US foreign policy occurred in 2011 when Hillary Clinton, who served as the Obama administration’s Secretary of State from 2009-2013, published an article where she argued that ‘[h]arnessing Asia’s growth and dynamism is central to American economic and strategic interests’, proposing ‘substantially increased investment ... in the Asia-Pacific region’ as a key course of the Obama administration’s foreign policy.¹¹ Arguably the most crucial component of what became dubbed the “pivot” to Asia was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which Clinton envisioned would ‘bring together economies from across the Pacific – developed and developing alike – into a single trading community’.¹² Negotiations for this free trade zone, which was poised to become ‘the world’s largest regional trading bloc’, excluded China and might have been intended as a counterweight to its growing economic power in East Asia.¹³ It seems likely that the Obama administration’s Asia-Pacific policy, in its focus on a trade zone absent China, was a crucial turning point for the accepted US foreign policy course of engaging with China. China’s response to the American bid for Asia-Pacific economic partnership was not to seek membership of the TPP and accept any concessions that said membership would entail, but rather ‘to develop its own set of international institutions’ absent the US, such as the ‘Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank’ and the ‘Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership’.¹⁴ Additionally, Xi Jinping

¹⁰ Kate Lyons, 2019, ‘China extends influence in Pacific as Solomon Islands break with Taiwan’. *The Guardian*, 16 September. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/16/china-extends-influence-in-pacific-as-solomon-islands-break-with-taiwan> (Accessed: 28 November 2019).

¹¹ Hillary Clinton, 2011, ‘America’s Pacific Century: The Future of Geopolitics Will Be Decided in Asia, Not in Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States Should Be Right at the Center of the Action’. *Foreign Policy*, (189): 57. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41353253> (Accessed: 12 March 2019).

¹² Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 62.

¹³ Georg Löfflmann, 2016, ‘The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint: President Obama’s Conflicted Grand Strategy in Asia’. *Asian Security*, 12(2): 97-98. doi: 10.1080/14799855.2016.1190338.

¹⁴ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 35.

began pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which was ‘a multibillion-dollar infrastructure project to develop transportation networks in Central Asia and the Indian Ocean’.¹⁵ After the US had established a course on Asia-Pacific policy through pursuing the TPP, the newly elected Trump administration tore it all down in January 2017 by withdrawing from the (still pending) partnership.¹⁶ Amidst trade war, competition and confrontation, did the Trump administration complete the Obama administration’s transition away from engagement, and was engagement replaced with a new, coherent foreign policy strategy?

1.2 Research Questions

The primary research question that this thesis will attempt to answer is as follows: How did the US respond to China’s rise through its foreign policy from the Obama administration through the Trump administration, and can a change in the motives and contents of US foreign policy be identified throughout this period?

From this research question, several other questions can be derived. A key question is what the rise of China entails for American ambitions abroad, the sustainability of the liberal international order, and for the trend witnessed following the end of the Cold War towards an interconnected world through globalization. This is an unresolved question with a myriad of perspectives, but there can be no doubt that US administrations have their own conceptions of how China’s rise influences these areas and how this should be addressed through foreign policy. A response to the situation is fuelled in part by how the purposes of modern US foreign policy are understood by sitting administrations, so it will be of interest to attempt to identify what America’s goals and ambitions were under Obama and Trump respectively.

The second question concerns whether the Obama and Trump administrations’ policies signify a shift, a continuation or a modification of the US policy of engagement towards China. If there are major differences between the policies of the Obama and Trump administrations, it will also be imperative to explore why this has occurred. To do so, the Obama administration’s proposed policy of a US “pivot” from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific will be a central point of discussion. By analysing what was meant by the pivot policy, and in what ways and to what extent it was actually pursued, the “Asia pivot” and its fate will

¹⁵ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 34-35.

¹⁶ BBC News, 2017, ‘Trump executive order pulls out of TPP trade deal’. *BBC News*, 24 January. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38721056> (Accessed: 5 December 2019).

be used as a point of departure for exploring the foreign policy that the Trump administration has had to come up with.

A third question is what has taken the place of engagement, if the strategy has been abandoned, and how coherent the new approach is. This also concerns whether the approach to US foreign policy of the Obama administrations and the Trump administration was generally consistent enough to constitute a long-term strategy, or merely a set of disparate policies reflecting short-term ambitions, concerns and responses to domestic as well as foreign events and developments. Essentially, does it make sense to interpret US foreign policy under Obama and/or Trump in terms of a new approach to China taking form?

1.3 Thesis Scope and Methodology

The context of the research questions is China's recent economic rise and the American responses to this development. The Asia-Pacific region where China is situated is central to this topic, but an exhaustive overview of the United States' and China's relations with the states within this region is outside the scope of this thesis: regional actors including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan will be brought into discussion where appropriate, but the goal of this thesis is primarily to examine how the US has responded to the various challenges posed by a rising China. To this end, Chinese and American intentions and policies will be the principal focus of this thesis. US foreign policy will be evaluated primarily in terms of how it addresses China's possible aspirations of regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and China's challenges towards the liberal international order and the security of the US and its allies respectively.

A selection of primary sources, including written materials by foreign policy officials, speeches, official statements, reports and documents, will be used for analysis and discussion of the topic. Regarding primary sources that introduce statements, writings or speeches from Presidents or various foreign policy officials, the thesis will not primarily engage in rhetorical analysis: where rhetoric is concerned, the approach will rather be to attempt to relate what is said with what is done, in order to examine whether there is a disconnect between rhetoric and practice. Trump is well known for his unpredictable rhetoric, which entails that what he says may obscure the content of his actual policies, and instead direct press attention towards his rhetoric. It is the contents and intentions of US foreign policy, not its presentation, which this thesis aims to explore, which means an argumentative approach is warranted in order to explore what policy direction can be reasonably deduced from the available non-classified

evidence. The thesis will draw from a variety of secondary sources – scholarly articles, books, journals, think tanks – in order to explore the many perspectives of the debate on US-China relations and American foreign policy. Newspaper articles that report on events or developments in the Sino-American relationship will be frequently applied, as well as statistical data from institutions and organizations such as the World Bank and the OECD.

The thesis will draw from International Relations (IR) theory in several ways. The split between the perspectives of liberalism and realism in IR will be discussed in the introduction, in order to place developments in the Sino-American relationship and US foreign policy within a broader context of how feasible it is to conduct world politics through a rules-based order of international institutions. The debate has implications for what the US can hope to achieve through its foreign policy and is thus deemed relevant to the topic this thesis explores. The developments in the Sino-American relationship can also offer indications of which perspective(s) are best suited to explaining the present state of world politics; to this end, this thesis might contribute some useful insights for the debate between liberalism and realism in IR. The IR theories also offer concepts and terminology which will be applied where it is deemed to be useful to the analysis and discussion of the Sino-American relationship and US foreign policy. Despite the inclusion of theory, the thesis does not intend to subscribe to one particular theoretical perspective: it is not a thesis on IR theory.

The thesis will be organised chronologically, encompassing the period between the end of World War II until the present, but concentrating on the Obama and Trump administrations from 2009 until the present. The period between 1945-2009 will be discussed in brevity in chapter 2 in order to chronicle the rise of China and the American strategy of engagement with China, which occurred amidst economic globalization and the growing scope of liberal economic and political institutions. This historical overview will serve as the foundation for evaluating the policies of the Obama and Trump administrations, as several challenges concerning China's rise and the feasibility of engagement began before Obama took office. Due to the contemporary nature of the topic, the situation in the Sino-American relationship is continually evolving as of this writing, which necessitates a limitation on the extent to which events, policies and developments of Spring 2020 will be given treatment in this thesis. Therefore, some very recent events and developments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, will not be discussed in full detail.

1.4 Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 introduces the thesis' topic and research questions, its scope and its methodology in terms of the role of theory and which sources will be utilized. Subsequently, a general overview of the current state of the Sino-American relationship will be provided based on recent scholarship, in order to explore some perspectives on where US foreign policy towards China is headed. The final sections address the debate between liberalism and realism as theories of IR and what it can offer to discussions of the Sino-American relationship, and the traditions that have guided past US foreign policy in general.

Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of US foreign policy towards China, China's internal developments and the Sino-American relationship before Obama took office in 2009, beginning with the emergence of Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China in 1949. The chapter will concentrate on the US strategy of engagement that was introduced by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, which led the US to promote the PRC's institutional integration within the liberal international order. Towards the end of the chapter, an increasingly prosperous China's challenges to the feasibility of the engagement strategy rise to the forefront, and the issues of its statist economic model and its military assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region are discussed in order to understand why the Obama administration sought to implement a new Asia-Pacific policy.

Chapter 3 pursues the argument that the strategy of engagement with China was being phased out throughout the Obama administrations, and that deterrence rose to the forefront of US foreign policy towards China. It begins by investigating why the Obama administration proposed to make the Asia-Pacific region the focal point of US foreign policy. Hillary Clinton's article "America's Pacific Century" will be discussed in detail in order to explore what was meant by a "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific and what the underlying motives of the policy direction could have been, in the context of China's rise. The chapter then explores the extent to which these policy prescriptions were translated into actual policy, notably a planned free-trade zone in the form of a US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the ways in which an increasingly assertive China under Xi Jinping challenged the United States' attempt to increase its influence in the Asia-Pacific.

Chapter 4 discusses why the US foreign policy of the Trump administration supplanted engagement with confrontation of the PRC, and whether it was following a coherent policy direction or had yet to find a sustainable replacement for the engagement strategy. Beginning with the administration's withdrawal from the proposed Trans-Pacific

Partnership, Trump's unilateral approach of economic competition with China is discussed. The question of what the Trump administration intended to accomplish when starting a trade with China in 2018 is subsequently explored, before the chapter turns to military and diplomatic aspects of US foreign policy towards China that reveal that confrontation was not limited to economic competition. Finally, the thesis' conclusion concerns why the strategy of engagement failed and how the Sino-American relationship is now facing an uncertain future, as well as what implications the end of engagement could have for future US foreign policy.

1.5 The Contemporary Sino-American Relationship: An Overview

Through reviewing recent scholarship on US foreign policy and China, this paper attempts to provide an overview of the state of contemporary Sino-American relations. A defining and commonly agreed upon feature of today's Sino-American relations is that the Trump administration heralds a strategic shift away from engagement, the longevity of which remains to be seen. Kevin Rudd suggests that the words and actions of the Trump administration have 'formally declared an end to a 40-year period of U.S. strategic engagement with China, and its replacement with a new period of strategic competition'.¹⁷ His narrative holds that the newfound strategy of competition is a response to the fact that 'China's aggregate military and economic power has now begun to challenge U.S. global dominance'.¹⁸ Once issues of power enter the considerations of foreign policy officials, it is clear that some shift has occurred in US foreign policy, and it might be reasonable to propose that the situation with China has rendered geopolitical thinking less archaic as a tool for US foreign policy. This paper will use Phil Kelly's definition of classical geopolitics when subsequently referring to geopolitics: 'the positions of states, regions, and resources can affect states' actions and policies'.¹⁹ As for why engagement is being phased out, explanation might be found through Kurt Campbell, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the first Obama administration, and Ely Ratner who exemplify the argument that the US strategy of engagement with China has failed:

¹⁷ Kevin Rudd, 2018, 'How to Avoid an Avoidable War: Ten Questions About the New U.S. China Strategy'. *Foreign Affairs*, 22 October. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-10-22/how-avoid-avoidable-war> (Accessed: 6 March 2020).

¹⁸ Rudd, 'How to Avoid an Avoidable War'.

¹⁹ Phil Kelly, 2017, 'Defending Classical Geopolitics'. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 3. doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.279.

Across the ideological spectrum, we in the U.S. foreign policy community have remained deeply invested in expectations about China—about its approach to economics, domestic politics, security, and global order—even as evidence against them has accumulated. The policies built on such expectations have failed to change China in the ways we intended or hoped.²⁰

These expectations of engagement are summed up by Stephen Kotkin: the United States as ‘liberal hegemon’ was meant to engender transformation of the PRC, by welcoming it into the system of liberal institutions where the US was at the forefront.²¹ In so doing, China could either ‘remain authoritarian and stagnate or liberalize to continue to grow’, making a scenario of great-power competition across lines of ideology and political systems – such as witnessed in the Cold War – inconceivable.²² The bottom line is that China’s rise and lack of internal transformation through liberalization has contributed to creating uncertainty about whether engagement has been successful. This is reflected not only by scholarly debate but by the policies of the Trump administration, which has assumed a more hostile tone towards the PRC, broken with Obama’s plans for a substantial American role in a Trans-Pacific Partnership, and induced a trade war with the PRC. Taken together, these trends illustrate that competition has become a key word in US foreign policy towards China. Uri Friedman points out in *The Atlantic* how the hitherto vaguely defined concept of “great-power competition” has spread throughout political circles beyond partisan affiliation, the media, scholarship, policy officials as well as strategic documents under the Trump administration, becoming a catchphrase of the Sino-American relationship in the Trump era after growing in popularity throughout the Obama years.²³

Rather than engaging with China through the liberal international order and its institutions and embrace its economic growth, the consensus seems to be shifting towards competition in pursuit of unclear goals. Moving into a new foreign policy agenda raises many questions, and the problem occurs, as Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan point out, in the act of defining competition: ‘What, exactly, is the United States competing for?’, and when and how

²⁰ Campbell and Ratner, ‘The China Reckoning’, 62.

²¹ Stephen Kotkin, 2018, ‘Realist World: The Players Change, but the Game Remains’. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(4): 10. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-06-14/realist-world> (Accessed: 9 April 2019).

²² Kotkin, ‘Realist World’, 10.

²³ Uri Friedman, 2019, ‘What Is the Genesis of Great-Power Competition: The New Concept Everyone in Washington Is Talking About’. *The Atlantic*, 6 August. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/what-genesis-great-power-competition/595405/> (Accessed: 27 August 2019).

does a winner get declared?²⁴ These questions open the door for debate and analysis, regarding the purposes of US foreign policy – why the US is competing with China, and what it is hoping to achieve through this process – and prescriptions on what practical, implementable components a strategy of competition would consist of in order to succeed. There is also the question of what competition actually means; if it can be comparable in any way to previous foreign policy strategies, such as Cold War-era containment. Though Trump has brought competition with China out of the shadows, support of the strategy is by no means restricted to the Republican party: for example, in the midst of campaigning for the Democratic nomination in the 2020 Presidential election, Joe Biden offered prescriptions on how ‘[t]o win the competition for the future against China or anyone else’ in a Foreign Affairs article.²⁵ Furthermore, he wrote that ‘China is playing the long game by extending its global reach, promoting its own political model, and investing in the technologies of the future’, adding that ‘[t]he United States does need to get tough with China’.²⁶ Bipartisan consensus – at least from centrist Democrats – on framing China as a competitor rather than potential partner seems to be forming. Additionally, the issues raised by Biden, such as the expansion of Chinese foreign policy ambitions and export of an alternative to the free-market capitalism of the liberal international order, shows how geopolitics might be increasingly impacting how the Sino-American relationship is perceived in the US: there is growing uncertainty about whether a reliance on the economic institutions of the liberal international order can suffice in meeting the challenge of a non-compliant China from the American perspective.

This uncertainty finds its reflection in the policies of the Trump administration, which has challenged liberal institutions and America’s role within the liberal order beyond the case of Sino-American competition. Clark Packard, writing in *Foreign Policy*, highlights how Trump has waged a ‘war of attrition on the WTO’s Appellate Body’, by obstructing ‘nominees to the Geneva-based tribunal’, in so doing weakening the WTO as a body for trade regulations and diminishing America’s future influence in such an important component of

²⁴ Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, 2019, ‘Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist With China’. *Foreign Affairs*, 98(5): 96. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/competition-with-china-without-catastrophe> (Accessed: 10 September 2019).

²⁵ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2020, ‘Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump’. *Foreign Affairs*, 99(2): 68. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again> (Accessed: 23 January 2020).

²⁶ Biden, ‘Why America Must Lead Again’, 70.

the liberal institutional framework of global trade.²⁷ Packard even suggests Trump's actions bring more pressing concerns to the sustainability of the WTO than 'China's mercantilist trade policies'.²⁸ The case of China can be useful to explore why there is an uneasy relationship between the liberal institutional order and the Trump administration: Tim Roemer exemplifies the notion that China has not contributed to the liberal economic system in proportion to its gains, citing factors such as 'America's \$419 billion trade imbalance with China', China's economic approach unjustly favouring its own 'state-owned enterprises', and China posturing as a developing state whilst circumventing the international rules it is expected to follow.²⁹ From the American view, the inequity of the situation vis-à-vis China has fostered doubt about whether the liberal institutional order can succeed in securing a fair system of international trade, and from the order's perceived failings arises the increasing appeal of confrontation: to approach China guided by American interests as a nation rather than as a figurehead of an international system of nations. Under Trump, this has taken the form of economic competition through a Sino-American trade war. The question that arises from this is whether other perspectives – geopolitical and realist – are becoming more influential and relevant than liberal internationalism in determining the direction of US foreign policy. For instance, Weijian Shan argues that Trump 'sees the tariffs as a means to slow China's economic rise and check the growing power of a geopolitical competitor', essentially that the trade war is guided by American geopolitical concerns.³⁰ Whether this was the Trump administration's intention when introducing tariffs is disputable and will be a point of discussion in chapter 4.

Perry Anderson, in a book critically scrutinizing the thinkers, ideas and traditions that have guided US foreign policy, proposes a central question that permeates the US foreign policy intellectual discourse of the 21st century: 'Is American power in global decline?'.³¹ An issue which arises when this question is considered by pundits is 'the risks of a renewal of Great Power rivalry – China figuring most prominently, but not exclusively – that could

²⁷ Clark Packard, 2020, 'Trump's Real Trade War Is Being Waged on the WTO'. *Foreign Policy*, 9 January. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/09/trumps-real-trade-war-is-being-waged-on-the-wto/> (Accessed: 9 March 2020).

²⁸ Packard, 'Trump's Real Trade War'.

²⁹ Tim Roemer, 2019, 'The U.S. Trade War Has Caught Beijing's Attention. Now Washington Needs a Longer-Term Plan'. *Foreign Policy*, 22 November. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/22/us-china-strategy-trade-war/> (Accessed: 9 March 2020).

³⁰ Weijian Shan, 2019, 'The Unwinnable Trade War: Everyone Loses in the U.S.-Chinese Clash – but Especially Americans'. *Foreign Affairs*, 98(6): 107. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2019-10-08/unwinnable-trade-war> (Accessed: 18 October 2019).

³¹ Perry Anderson, 2017, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers*. Reprint edition. London/New York: Verso, 164.

endanger American primacy'.³² Concerns of American primacy predate the Trump administration, but the administration might have brought this issue to the forefront of US foreign policy concerns through its confrontational policy towards China, in so doing highlighting the power configurations of the 21st century in terms of nation-states rather than as members of an international order. This is a framing which affords potency to geopolitical and realist approaches as parts of the US foreign policy discourse. In a truly global rules-based order there would seemingly be no place for great power rivalry, but as confrontation ramps up with China it would seem that the liberal order is no longer America's prime concern; how the Sino-American relationship evolves in the coming period could be important in deciding whether America's commitment to liberal internationalism is on standby or in the process of being abandoned altogether.

The onset of Sino-American competition based on bipartisan support, uncertainty about the extent to which American primacy is in decline, and Trump's hostility towards liberal institutionalism demonstrates that US foreign policy might be approaching a turning point. From the above summary some key issues can be identified, which can be explored to gain insight into why the US is competing with China and what this competition entails for the US and the liberal international order. The first concerns liberal institutions: what are the prospects of the liberal international order and the role of the United States within it? This will be explored through presenting the competing perspectives of liberalism and realism as theories of IR, to explore why the debate between the two theories is unresolved and what IR theory can contribute to understanding past and present US foreign policy. In order to determine what kind of relationship the US should pursue with China and the liberal order, the second issue concerns the ambiguity regarding the purposes of US foreign policy and the extent to which it is currently guided by realist, idealist or a combination of these American foreign policy traditions. This will be addressed by clarifying what these traditions represent and which tradition(s) have guided US foreign policy before the Obama and Trump administrations, so as to better understand how the policies of the Obama and Trump administrations can be interpreted.

³² Anderson, *American Foreign Policy*, 164.

1.6 The United States, China and the Liberal International Order

The Case for Liberal Order

With the 2016 election victory of Donald Trump and the rise of a still authoritarian and increasingly assertive China, there is good reason to debate what the future of liberalism holds, and why the liberal international order, which at the end of the Cold War looked set to bring about a peaceful world through extending its reach worldwide, ended up in disarray. A central question for the US, which has played a leading role in the liberal international order since the postwar period, is whether its foreign policy should draw from the assumptions of liberal IR theory, or whether other perspectives should rise to the forefront of foreign policy considerations. Essentially, if Trump is moving the US away from liberal democracy and the liberal international order, is he right in doing so? G. John Ikenberry contends in 2018 that '[f]or seven decades the world has been dominated by a western liberal order', an order whose 'hegemonic leadership' was attributable to the United States.³³ For Ikenberry, the characteristics of liberalism's contemporary situation is that '[t]he American hegemonic organization of liberal order is weakening, but the more general organizing ideas and impulses of liberal internationalism run deep in world politics'.³⁴

The remedy for liberal internationalism is for 'the United States and other liberal democracies' to 'recapture their progressive political orientation' and 'expand and rebuild a wider coalition of states willing to cooperate within a reformed liberal global order'; to go even further in the direction of liberalism, rather than seek alternatives.³⁵ The first criteria is domestic, the other in the realms of foreign policy; Ikenberry locates the need for progressive politics in how American 'domestic progressive policy and movements', particularly Roosevelt's New Deal, were the catalysts for the United States' past internationalism.³⁶ Thus, for liberal internationalism to be effectively pursued by the US necessitates resolving the domestic crisis in liberal democracy that the election of Trump is a telling symptom of. Ikenberry argues that an identity crisis occurred in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its ideological threat as well as 'the globalization of the liberal order': what began as 'a western security community' expanded and transformed into something far grander in scale, alienating the original members from their 'sense of security community' by bringing

³³ G. John Ikenberry, 2018, 'The end of liberal international order?'. *International Affairs*, 94(1): 7. doi: 10.1093/ia/iix241.

³⁴ Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', 8.

³⁵ Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', 23.

³⁶ Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', 22.

the other into the equation.³⁷ Perhaps even more importantly, ‘the fortunes of workers and middle-class citizens in Europe and the United States have stagnated’ following the Great Recession, and ‘almost all the growth in wealth since the 1980s has gone to the top 20 per cent of earners’ in the US.³⁸ In Ikenberry’s version of liberalism, it appears that the alienation of globalization coupled with the economic dissatisfaction of the middle class has brought disillusionment to the concept of liberal democracy in the US, and paved the way for Trump; only through progressive domestic policies can faith be reinstated in liberalism among Americans.

How can China’s rise, continued authoritarianism and increased assertiveness be approached from the lens of liberal international relations theory? In “Liberal World: The Resilient Order”, published in 2018, Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry make the case that liberal democracy and the liberal international order is not doomed despite Russia and China having ‘strengthened their authoritarian systems at home and flouted norms abroad’ instead of acquiescing with the liberal order.³⁹ Their argument is that ‘[e]ven though the United States’ relative power is waning, the international system that the country has sustained for seven decades is remarkably durable’.⁴⁰ This is ensured by ‘economic, security-related, and environmental’ interdependence, which is viewed as intrinsic to the modern globalized world and is ‘relentlessly’ increasing; this state of interdependence necessitates deeper ‘political integration’ and cooperation in order for nation-states to survive and avoid disaster.⁴¹ They argue for a tempered interpretation of liberalism’s contemporary problems which avoids ‘presentism’, as ‘[t]he problems that liberal democracies face today, while great, are certainly not more challenging than those that they have faced and overcome in these historically recent decades’, such as ‘the Great Depression, the Axis powers, and the international communist movement’.⁴² Despite China not moving towards a liberal democratic system despite integration with the liberal international order, Deudney and Ikenberry point out that the order’s ‘survival does not depend on all of its members being liberal democracies’; this is because of Westphalian principles serving as institutional foundation in the order.⁴³ On the topic of the Sino-American relationship in the Trump era,

³⁷ Ikenberry, ‘The end of liberal international order?’, 20.

³⁸ Ikenberry, ‘The end of liberal international order?’, 20.

³⁹ Daniel D. Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 2018, ‘Liberal World: The Resilient Order’. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(4): 16. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-06-14/liberal-world> (Accessed: 12 September 2019).

⁴⁰ Deudney and Ikenberry, ‘Liberal World’, 16.

⁴¹ Deudney and Ikenberry, ‘Liberal World’, 16.

⁴² Deudney and Ikenberry, ‘Liberal World’, 20 & 24.

⁴³ Deudney and Ikenberry, ‘Liberal World’, 21.

whilst acknowledging that damage is being done through for instance the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, they remark optimistically of the possibility that ‘Trump’s focus on China as a great-power rival will compel him or some future administration to refurbish and expand U.S. alliances rather than withdraw from them’, in so doing deepening the United States’ integration within the international system rather than diminishing its role.⁴⁴

From the perspective of Deudney and Ikenberry, momentary weakness and not dramatic decline is the challenge liberalism is facing. As for why any international order needs to be liberal in character, this is because of liberalism’s versatility in changing times: ‘Liberalism is unique among the major theories of international relations in its protean vision of interdependence and cooperation—features of the modern world that will only become more important as the century unfolds’.⁴⁵ This perspective suggests that US foreign policy should focus on bolstering and promoting the liberal international order, under the assumption that the order will prevail through its difficulties and it is in American interests to continue to play a leading part in it. As for China, there is no escaping its state of interdependence courtesy of globalization: should it seek to influence or reshape international order to reflect rules and norms better suited to its more authoritarian regime or assert itself on its own terms outside of any order, this will be ill suited for long-term survival in a world of interconnectedness that to Deudney and Ikenberry renders liberalism the only viable solution. To ensure peace, it would be optimal to have China acquiesce within the liberal international order. Yet should the PRC choose not to do so, this is no disaster; its efforts will lead to nothing beyond the possibility of conflict in the short term. Presumably, even if China were to successfully manage to create and sustain an order of its own, this order would eventually meet with the fate of Communism. This is not to say that such a situation would not carry with it the potential of devastating conflict, but if the US and other liberal democracies do not abandon the belief in liberalism and weather the storm, they will eventually come out on top.

If the liberal perspective is correct, the best course of action for the US would be to repair the crevices in its liberal democracy and continue to focus its foreign policy energies on the liberal project, in so doing dissuading China from attempting to resist or challenge the liberal world, which could seem tempting in liberalism’s moment of weakness. The one key assumption that this narrative rests on is that the globalized world has created a state of

⁴⁴ Deudney and Ikenberry, ‘Liberal World’, 23-24.

⁴⁵ Deudney and Ikenberry, ‘Liberal World’, 24.

interdependence and that liberalism is best suited to address this condition, both domestically through liberal democracy at home and internationally through liberal internationalism. The economic dimension is crucial as far as interdependence is concerned: is China's approach to politics and the economy conducive to its future sustainability? To answer this question necessitates an examination of China's economic model of state capitalism, which this thesis will turn to in later chapters: the model affording an authoritarian government more influence over the economy has worked to China's benefit so far, which to Branko Milanovic 'undermines the West's claim that there is a necessary link between capitalism and liberal democracy'.⁴⁶ If China is able to retain control and avoid liberalization without succumbing to economic decline, the idea of the necessity of the liberal international order starts to unravel.

Challenges to Liberalism

The complicating factor regarding the implications of China's rise and refusal to abandon authoritarianism is that no one can know for certain whether China's model will succeed or not, and whether its economic growth is headed towards ascent or decline. To exemplify the latter perspective, Michael Beckley states that the 'official gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate has dropped from 15 percent to six percent' and argues that whilst the current rate surpasses that of the US, GDP as an indicator of economic growth is too unreliable as China's growth rate is bloated by state intervention through investment in unnecessary infrastructure.⁴⁷ What is lacking according to this narrative is 'productivity' in order to facilitate further growth, and a national debt which 'currently exceeds 300 percent of its GDP' further aggravates China's economic problems.⁴⁸ Beckley argues that the consequence of what he perceives to be China's economic decline is an imminent increase of Chinese aggression in foreign affairs, and the state's turn towards 'more repressive' domestic policies.⁴⁹ This position aligns with that of Deudney and Ikenberry's liberalism; China will suffer an inevitable failure to survive in a globalized world if it does not further liberalize the economy, and defiance of this reality may lead to short-term conflict and instability but no

⁴⁶ Branko Milanovic, 2020, 'The Clash of Capitalisms: The Real Fight for the Global Economy's Future'. *Foreign Affairs*, 99(1): 12. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2019-12-10/clash-capitalisms> (Accessed: 12 March 2020).

⁴⁷ Michael Beckley, 2019, 'The United States Should Fear a Faltering China: Beijing's Assertiveness Betrays Its Desperation'. *Foreign Affairs*, 28 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-10-28/united-states-should-fear-faltering-china> (Accessed: 29 October 2019).

⁴⁸ Beckley, 'The United States Should Fear a Faltering China'.

⁴⁹ Beckley, 'The United States Should Fear a Faltering China'.

real chance at supplanting or even matching liberalism's position as the most viable economic and political system in the 21st century. But this position is challenged by Stephen Kotkin, who argues that 'Chinese institutions have managed to mix meritocracy and corruption, competence and incompetence' and prospered, and whilst the possibility for eventual decline or collapse is real, the certainty of this outcome that liberalism insists upon is unwarranted: 'analysts have been predicting exactly that for decades, and they've been consistently wrong so far'.⁵⁰ Thus, the uncertainty of how dangerous the China model is for free-market capitalism could provide ample motivation for economic competition as US foreign policy direction, in order to counteract the model's potential future success.

Some argue that the liberal international order – and America's predominance within it – no longer encompasses the world: for Stephen Kotkin, 'China's sphere has expanded prodigiously and will continue to do so', and the US has to concede that it is now necessary to 'share global leadership'.⁵¹ Graham Allison similarly argues that '[u]nipolarity is over, and with it the illusion that other nations would simply take their assigned place in a U.S.-led international order'.⁵² A strategic redefinition of US foreign policy that does not base itself solely on the assumptions of liberalism might be necessary: '[g]oing forward, U.S. policymakers will have to abandon unattainable aspirations for the worlds they dreamed of and accept the fact that spheres of influence will remain a central feature of geopolitics'.⁵³ Stephen M. Walt finds that 'if China's impressive rise continues, it is likely to seek a dominant position in Asia', and if this goal is reached, 'Chinese hegemony in Asia would give Beijing the latitude to project power around the world'; it is up to the United States to ensure such a scenario does not come about if US primacy is to be secured into the future, if possible.⁵⁴ His prescription for future foreign policy is the realist concept of offshore balancing, which he argues would have produced a better outcome than liberal hegemony if speculatively applied to US foreign policy from the 1980s: such a policy would have avoided unnecessary wars, tensions with Russia, and crucially rendered 'the United States better prepared to deal with a rising China' by having 'devoted more time and attention to managing relations with Beijing and reinforcing America's Asian alliances', equipped with the material capabilities to meet China's challenge which in reality were thrown away through the costly

⁵⁰ Kotkin, 'Realist World', 10.

⁵¹ Kotkin, 'Realist World', 15.

⁵² Graham Allison, 2020, 'The New Spheres of Influence: Sharing the Globe With Other Great Powers'. *Foreign Affairs*, 99(2): 30. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-02-10/new-spheres-influence> (Accessed: 28 February 2020).

⁵³ Allison, 'The New Spheres of Influence', 40.

⁵⁴ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 269.

and misguided wars in the Middle East.⁵⁵ If China continues its growth, and the distance in terms of ambitions, policies, economic and political systems between China and the West expands further, American foreign policy might have to consider realist perspectives to a larger extent and concede that for the time being, liberal internationalism does not rule the world.

Critical voices are thus challenging whether the US commitment to the liberal international order has been successful to counteract China's ambitions, as Walt's position exemplifies, but there is also an argument to be made that the liberal order itself is in grave decline. In a 2019 article, John J. Mearsheimer pursues the argument that '[w]ith or without China, the liberal international order was destined to fail, because it was fatally flawed at birth'.⁵⁶ In his interpretation of what is meant by a liberal international order, 'the aim is to create a world order consisting exclusively of liberal democracies that are economically engaged with each other and bound together by sets of common rules'; the ideal is not just to maintain a region of liberal democracies, but to bring about a liberal world motivated by liberal ideology's 'powerful universalistic strand'.⁵⁷ Mearsheimer notes that the supplanting of Bretton Woods, which gave states some autonomy 'to adopt protectionist policies', by "hyperglobalization" from the 1980s onwards has created significant grievances for 'the legitimacy of the liberal world order'.⁵⁸ This is because 'almost any kind of government interference in the workings of the world economy was considered harmful to the liberal international order'; the repercussions of the absence of statist economic autonomy and unimpeded globalization have been major unemployment, 'staggering economic inequality' to the detriment of 'the lower and middle classes in the liberal West', and vulnerability to financial crises across borders.⁵⁹ With the state's limited opportunities to influence the economy having produced ailments for the bulk of US citizens, Trump was able to gain momentum and become President 'by railing against international institutions, but also by making the case for pursuing protectionist economic policies', in so doing attracting those who were negatively affected by the liberal international order's constitution and seeking a better alternative.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 266-269.

⁵⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, 2019, 'Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order'. *International Security*, 43(4): 42. Available at: muse.jhu.edu/article/723956 (Accessed: 28 August 2019).

⁵⁷ Mearsheimer, 'Bound to Fail', 14.

⁵⁸ Mearsheimer, 'Bound to Fail', 38-39.

⁵⁹ Mearsheimer, 'Bound to Fail', 39-41.

⁶⁰ Mearsheimer, 'Bound to Fail', 40-41.

The predicament of the liberal order goes beyond the economic sphere, as the way US foreign policy has responded to China's rise – by engagement in hopes of China's liberalization – has exacerbated the crisis:

What the architects of that policy did not realize, however, is that by helping accelerate Chinese growth, they were actually helping undermine the liberal order, as China has rapidly grown into an economic powerhouse with significant military capability. In effect, they have helped China become a great power, thus undercutting unipolarity, which is essential for maintaining a liberal world order.⁶¹

Essentially, the US helped create its own competitor, and brought America's liberal hegemony toward its end, as Deudney and Ikenberry also acknowledged. The liberal and realist perspectives offered here also agree that Trump's election reflects economic dissatisfaction amongst Americans. But where Deudney and Ikenberry argued that liberalism will come back shortly, Mearsheimer envisions the return of great-power politics and a scenario where the United States and China engage in 'significant economic and military competition' in a multipolar world.⁶² For Mearsheimer, the liberal international order was never designed to supplant the interests of nation-states with universalism, since 'great powers do not work together to promote world order for its own sake. Instead, each seeks to maximize its own share of world power'.⁶³ International orders are desirable to the extent that they advantage the states invested in them, and '[t]he particular international order that obtains at any time is mainly a by-product of the self-interested behavior of the system's great powers'.⁶⁴

If realist thinking is given credence, it might be too late for the US to maintain hegemony mainly through its leading role in the liberal international order: the world is headed towards divergent spheres of influence, and idealist visions of transforming China and continuing the unipolar era must give way for a realist approach where American security rises to the forefront and geopolitics, competition and containment become relevant options to protect America's national interests. If the US intends to maintain primacy, they must 'prevent aggressors from upsetting the balance of power'; to do this, the strategy of "balancing" – entailing for the US to 'seriously commit themselves to containing their dangerous opponent' and 'shoulder the burden of deterring, or fighting if need be, the

⁶¹ Mearsheimer, 'Bound to Fail', 42.

⁶² Mearsheimer, 'Bound to Fail', 44.

⁶³ John J. Mearsheimer, 2014, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Updated edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 49.

⁶⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 49.

aggressor’ – is a feasible option.⁶⁵ For Mearsheimer, containment – ‘keeping Beijing from using its military forces to conquer territory and more generally expand its influence in Asia’ by creating regional alliances in the Asia-Pacific – is America’s best option.⁶⁶ This approach was of course applied to US foreign policy towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War, at a distinctly different point in history when bipolarity and ideological conflict constituted considerably higher stakes than at present; China is not yet the United States’ peer, but it is unclear whether it could end up in this position, and when. Directly copying a Cold War-style containment strategy and applying it to the current situation would be to turn back the clock; resurrecting the strategy would require revising it, updating it for modern conditions in terms of technology and economic interdependence, and perhaps ultimately necessitating a different term than “containment”. Nevertheless, an insight from Mearsheimer is that following this thinking, the idea of preserving American power, and not preserving and promoting a rules-based liberal order which theoretically renders the balance of power redundant, becomes the crux of US strategy.

From this it can be asked whether the current state of Sino-American competition is an indication that realist thinking might be gaining credence in Washington; that the uncertainty of where China’s economy is headed gives contemporary US foreign policy reason to deter China before a Cold War-esque situation is reached, deterrence understood here as a preservation of a balance of power favourable to the US.⁶⁷ A key question is whether this can be done through liberal institutions and economic interdependence rather than returning to geopolitical strategy: essentially if China can still be persuaded to participate more deeply, rather than distance itself, from liberal institutions and their rules of economic and political conduct, through a softer approach. If this is to be done through economic competition or other means to stifle China’s growth, a challenge to this is offered by Mearsheimer who argues that ‘there is no practical way of slowing the Chinese economy without also damaging the American economy’.⁶⁸ Such are the consequences of globalization and the integration of China into the institutions of world trade, that the interconnectedness spurred on by Washington’s own foreign policy has now made responding to China’s rise quite complicated. Given how vested the US has been in the liberal international order, the split between liberalism and realism in international relations might be becoming more important

⁶⁵ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 139.

⁶⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 384.

⁶⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 360-361.

⁶⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 386.

to consider when deliberating what the US *can* accomplish in its foreign policy; whether it can afford to neglect the realist perspective and continue pursuing liberal internationalism without inviting an imposing security challenge from China. What the US *wants* to accomplish is a different question, one which merits a discussion of the foreign policy traditions that have guided American administrations so far and how these can inform a new policy direction suitable to the complex situation currently unfolding. The kind of realism with which US foreign policy officials and thinkers are concerned is distinct from realism ‘as pure theory, a paradigm in the study of international relations’, so in order to learn how and whether it is useful to apply thinkers like Mearsheimer to US foreign policy requires a discussion of what American realism is and its relationship to other strands of American foreign policy traditions.⁶⁹

1.7 The Purposes of US Foreign Policy

In order to explore what has motivated American foreign policy in the past, Walt Russell Mead’s *Special Providence* provides helpful terminology: in it, he identifies four key traditions of US foreign policy, namely the Wilsonian, Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian.⁷⁰ The Wilsonian tradition has a missionary quality, attributing to the US ‘a moral obligation and an important national interest in spreading American democratic and social values throughout the world’.⁷¹ It is well-suited for advancing the cause of liberal internationalism, as the main purpose of US foreign policy from this perspective is ‘creating a peaceful international community that accepts the rule of law’; an international order moulded by American values.⁷² The Hamiltonian tradition’s primary concern is commercial advances, brought about by creating ‘a strong alliance between the national government and big business’ as well as ensuring the US becomes ‘integrated into the global economy on favorable terms’.⁷³ Like the Wilsonian approach, this perspective attributes importance to extending America overseas and complements the liberal international order, though the economic rather than moral dimension is of primary importance. The remaining traditions are

⁶⁹ Anderson, *American Foreign Policy*, 215.

⁷⁰ Walter Russell Mead, 2009 (2001), *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*. (New York: Knopf). E-book of reprint edition. New York/Abingdon: Routledge. Citations refer to the Routledge edition. Purchased at: <https://www.adlibris.com/no/e-bok/special-providence-9781136758676> (Accessed: 17 March 2020).

⁷¹ Mead, *Special Providence*, xvii.

⁷² Mead, *Special Providence*, xvii.

⁷³ Mead, *Special Providence*, xvii.

the Jeffersonian, which argues ‘that American foreign policy should be less concerned about spreading democracy abroad than about safeguarding it at home’, and the Jacksonian approach valuing ‘the physical security and the economic well-being of the American people’ above all, epitomized by the saying “Don’t Tread on Me!”.⁷⁴

These latter traditions offer more restrictive ambitions for US foreign policy, both sharing the conviction ‘that the specific cultural, social, and political heritage of the United States is a precious treasure to be conserved, defended, and passed on to future generations’ and the notion that the US must ‘defend those values at home rather than to extend them abroad’.⁷⁵ Where they differ is in that most integral to the Jeffersonian tradition is ‘the preservation of American democracy in a dangerous world’, which should be done through ‘the least costly and dangerous method’; Jacksonians, on the other hand, belong to ‘a deeply embedded, widely spread populist and popular culture of honor, independence, courage, and military pride among the American people’.⁷⁶ As conceptual basis for interpreting foreign policy, these terms provide approximations of ideas that say something about what the US wishes to achieve through its foreign policy, not objective axioms. Mead himself points out that ‘[m]ost Americans combine different elements of different schools in their makeup’; there is interplay between, as well as divergence within, traditions.⁷⁷ But they might prove useful in understanding which ideas are prevailing in the contemporary discourse and practice of US foreign policy, and to expand upon the dichotomy of American idealism and realism.

In *America’s Search for Security*, Sean Kay argues that ‘American foreign policy traditionally reflects an idealist vision of Americans and their place in the world that is counterbalanced by realism’, but once the US reached hegemonic status as the Soviet Union dissolved, the idealist strand won out and developed into ‘a liberal and neoconservative consensus that America should spread its vision of democracy, freedom, and commerce’.⁷⁸ Unipolarity shoved realism to the side-lines, and the dominant idealist notion of advancing America abroad brought about ‘dramatic military overstretch, domestic economic crisis, and relative decline in American power’ by the time of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷⁹ The foundations of American idealism are in Kay’s interpretation trifold: the first component is a belief in the virtues of democracy, through the Kantian idea that ‘democracies are less

⁷⁴ Mead, *Special Providence*, xvii.

⁷⁵ Mead, *Special Providence*, 175.

⁷⁶ Mead, *Special Providence*, 88.

⁷⁷ Mead, *Special Providence*, 87 & 92-93.

⁷⁸ Sean Kay, 2014, *America’s Search for Security: The Triumph of Idealism and the Return of Realism*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1.

⁷⁹ Kay, *America’s Search for Security*, 149-150.

inclined toward war'.⁸⁰ Secondly, emphasis on universal 'individual freedom', of which the US is representation and figurehead of, gives American idealism a missionary character in that promoting freedom and 'democracy abroad might mean more peace for America'.⁸¹ The distinction between Wilsonians and Jeffersonians is relevant here, since both value democracy but differ on whether to promote it abroad; the Jeffersonian tradition is thus not affiliated with idealism as Kay presents it. The final component is a "spirit of commerce" that resonates with the Hamiltonian tradition, an idea that trade serves both as 'universal source of cooperation' and 'national interest' for the US, leading to the pursuit of institutionalization of free-trade capitalism internationally as a means to provide an ideal middle way between 'pure laissez-faire capitalism and nationalist protectionism'.⁸² American idealism's roots can be identified within liberalism, yet the tradition is not inherently linked with liberal internationalism, as it encompasses both liberal and neoconservative factions: 'Neoconservatives tend to part from liberals over whether the exercise of American power requires the legitimacy of international law or whether America should act unilaterally'.⁸³ Thus, neoconservatives view the US as positioned above the liberal international order; if American priorities were to diverge from the rules of the order, the American view would supersede international dictates.⁸⁴ It is thus possible for American idealism to find expression outside of a liberal international order.

As for American realism, Kay finds it to be 'historically more grounded in restraint and the cautious application of power'.⁸⁵ In this tradition, the normative impetus of idealism is restrained to identifying 'the conditions in which moral assumptions relate to national interests' and 'leading through example, rather than imposing values on others'.⁸⁶ Restraint abroad suggests that Jeffersonians and Jacksonians have more in common with the realist side of the divide. Instead of transforming the world with the US as its template, foreign policy should concern itself with '[securing] resources for survival', and approach other nation-states armed with 'sound information about the world and a country's position in it relative to others' – a geopolitical approach – coupled with the realist idea of how 'the balance of power' affects international actors.⁸⁷ Together, the traditions of idealism and realism ensured that US foreign policy 'ebbed and flowed between the expansion of interests and self-imposed

⁸⁰ Kay, *America's Search for Security*, 3.

⁸¹ Kay, *America's Search for Security*, 3-4.

⁸² Kay, *America's Search for Security*, 4.

⁸³ Kay, *America's Search for Security*, 2.

⁸⁴ Kay, *America's Search for Security*, 2.

⁸⁵ Kay, *America's Search for Security*, 10.

⁸⁶ Kay, *America's Search for Security*, 11.

⁸⁷ Kay, *America's Search for Security*, 11.

restraints on the exercise of power’ until the erroneous perception that realism was becoming superfluous took hold.⁸⁸ For Kay, reconciling American idealism and realism in the 21st century requires dismantling the entrenched idealist consensus: ‘[a]fter two decades of idealist-driven foreign and defense policy priorities, an entire bureaucratic and operational culture – and associated budgets – would have to be changed’.⁸⁹ Writing in 2014, Kay could not have anticipated the way in which this idealist consensus would come under assault through the election of Donald Trump; he interprets the Obama administration’s policy towards Asia as a positive step towards a balance between idealism and realism, a balance consisting of ‘leadership by example at home and with restraint abroad’.⁹⁰

It might appear as if Trump has brought a surplus of realism into US foreign policy and tipped the scales disproportionately in one direction, providing the antithesis to the excessive idealism of the preceding period. As for which aspect of American realism Trump draws from, Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts suggest that ‘President Trump has adopted a strategy of unilateralism to vindicate the Jacksonian segments of American society, and anchor notions of “national honor” and “reputation” to his America First sloganeering’.⁹¹ But whether the Trump administration has consistently been aligned with the realist tradition in his approach to China is a question this thesis will explore in later chapters, and to do so requires looking beyond rhetoric and taking into account whether the policies of his administration truly exemplify the realist position on how US foreign policy should be carried out. The most pressing question for the future of US foreign policy is whether Trump’s successors will attempt to rescue the idealist consensus or strive for some kind of compromise between traditions. To this end, the evolving situation with China might make the latter option more viable, as it merits considering American interests and security as a nation-state – and the geopolitical and realist measures that can ensure it – to a larger extent than before.

⁸⁸ Kay, *America’s Search for Security*, 12.

⁸⁹ Kay, *America’s Search for Security*, 291.

⁹⁰ Kay, *America’s Search for Security*, 291-292.

⁹¹ Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts, 2017, ‘Donald Trump and American foreign policy: The return of the Jacksonian tradition’. *Comparative Strategy*, 36(4): 373. doi: 10.1080/01495933.2017.1361210.

Chapter 2 – Engagement, America’s Asia-Pacific Challenges and China’s Ambitions

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will introduce some of the most important events, developments and policies regarding the US, China and the Asia-Pacific region that transpired between 1949 and the beginning of Barack Obama’s presidency in 2009. The rationale behind providing this background information is to present a historical overview of the various challenges that the US has to address in formulating its foreign policy approach to the PRC and the Asia-Pacific region, and especially one that provides an adequate response to China’s internal developments and external ambitions. The chapter reviews Sino-American relations from the postwar period until the Obama administration in 2009, whilst discussing the direction of US foreign policy vis-à-vis China. Engagement is identified as a key, yet not the only, strategy guiding much of US conduct leading up to the Obama administration. The final part of the chapter focuses on two key issues which shed doubt on the success of US engagement: China’s economic growth in the context of its distinct economic model, and China’s turn towards a more assertive military policy.

2.2 Postwar Sino-American Relations and the US Strategy of Engagement

The Cold War and the Beginning of Engagement

In 1949, the emergence of Mao Zedong as communist leader of the People’s Republic of China engendered a period of extensive transformations, by placing China into opposition with ‘Western democracy, Soviet leadership of the Communist world, and the legacy of the Chinese past’.⁹² Mao aimed to realize ‘a form of Communism intrinsic to China’, through discarding old customs in favour of the new.⁹³ According to Henry Kissinger, Mao’s visions of grandeur were not restricted to national rejuvenation: the PRC’s relative weakness in terms of power capabilities was merely a temporary condition, to be rectified through ‘years of

⁹² Henry Kissinger, 2015, *World Order*. Reprint edition. New York: Penguin Books, 221.

⁹³ Kissinger, *World Order*, 221-222.

struggle' in order to place China firmly at the centre of the world.⁹⁴ Though Mao's vision displayed a great willingness to engender sweeping transformations to revitalize China, a heavy cost in terms of human lives paved the way for this goal. Policies like the 1958 Great Leap Forward and the 1966 Cultural Revolution may have been designed to realize China's "true" potential, yet they carried devastating ramifications in the form of '[t]ens of millions' of lives.⁹⁵ The bloody legacy of the PRC's establishment is impossible to ignore, especially so for the contemporary Chinese Communist Party (CCP), whose ideological legitimacy depends on accounting for the loss of lives during the Maoist period. Timothy R. Heath suggests that the party has addressed the issue by positing 'that Mao's theoretical contributions retain universal validity, but only for situations such as China faced in the pre-reform period', in this way justifying past atrocities as necessary sacrifices on the way to a stronger China whilst alleviating the citizenry's fear that history could repeat itself.⁹⁶

Though China was weaker and thus a much less pressing threat than the Soviet Union, the ideological gap between the US and China nevertheless contributed to placing both states into adversarial positions in the postwar era. On the American side of the ideological divide was liberalism. According to G. John Ikenberry, it was in the postwar years that 'American-led liberal internationalism emerged as a distinctive type of order'.⁹⁷ In his view, the four key features of this liberal international order were 'open multilateral trade', 'a "managed" open world economy', 'new and permanent international institutions' and the partnerships between 'western liberal democracies'.⁹⁸ The US occupied a central role in this order, which Kissinger attributes to a continuous belief amongst American postwar administrations in 'the applicability of American principles to the entire world'.⁹⁹ Through measures like the Marshall Plan and the establishment of 'a global network of security and economic partnerships' – the military alliance of NATO being a key example – the US was essential to the rise of the postwar period's Western liberal international order and the institutions that reinforced it.¹⁰⁰ Naturally, Maoist China did not conform to the ideals of the liberal international order. Geographically, it was located in East Asia, away from the European continent within which US alliance-building efforts were primarily concentrated, and

⁹⁴ Kissinger, *World Order*, 222-223.

⁹⁵ Kissinger, *World Order*, 223.

⁹⁶ Timothy R. Heath, 2015, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm: Political Renewal and the Pursuit of National Rejuvenation*. Reprint edition. Farnham/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 51.

⁹⁷ G. John Ikenberry, 2018, 'The end of liberal international order?'. *International Affairs*, 94(1): 15. doi: 10.1093/ia/iix241.

⁹⁸ Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', 15-16.

⁹⁹ Kissinger, *World Order*, 276.

¹⁰⁰ Kissinger, *World Order*, 277.

Communist ideology – especially Mao’s nationalistic interpretation – was not compatible with ideals of neither open trade nor diplomatic and economic partnership. The Korean War of 1950-53 demonstrated how these clashing world views could lead to US-Chinese relations transpiring into direct hostility. Guided by larger ambitions of ‘reunifying the peninsula under non-Communist control’, the US involved itself in an attempt to quell an invasion of South Korea carried out by a communist North Korea, the latter being backed by China.¹⁰¹ The protracted Vietnam war again pitted the US and China against each other through their support of opposite sides.

Yet Richard Nixon’s approach to US foreign policy indicated the possibility of moving beyond hostile Sino-American relations. In 1972, he visited the PRC in a ‘lavishly televised’ meeting orchestrated by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, which sought to convey to the American public that the US administration could harmonize relations with China and even ‘enable the United States to play off China against the Soviet Union’.¹⁰² Though the US and China were guided by opposing ideologies, there was no consensus between the communisms of the Soviet Union and the PRC since Mao believed fervently in China’s superiority, leading to the possibility of the US exploiting this tension between the two communist states. As Henry Kissinger puts it retrospectively, ‘[a]n improved relationship with China would gradually isolate the Soviet Union or impel it to seek better relations with the United States’.¹⁰³ Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner identify this opening to China as the beginning of ‘the assumption that deepening commercial, diplomatic and cultural ties would transform China’s internal development and external behavior’, by virtue of ‘U.S. power and hegemony’, an assumption which they argue has guided the strategy of subsequent administrations.¹⁰⁴ Over time, however, the Kissinger-Nixon strategy of engagement vis-à-vis China has been criticized for failing to produce the expected outcomes and thus having misguided quite a substantial bulk of political thinking in the US. Campbell and Ratner provide one such interpretation:

All sides of the policy debate erred: free traders and financiers who foresaw inevitable and increasing openness in China, integrationists who argued that Beijing’s ambitions would be

¹⁰¹ James T. Patterson, 1997, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*. Reprint edition. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 207-208.

¹⁰² Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 746.

¹⁰³ Kissinger, *World Order*, 306.

¹⁰⁴ Campbell and Ratner, ‘The China Reckoning’, 60.

tamed by greater interaction with the international community, and hawks who believed that China's power would be abated by perpetual American primacy.¹⁰⁵

If there is truth in their harsh assessment, it is pertinent to evaluate whether engagement failed in the period leading up to the Obama administration's "pivot", in order to understand why the Obama administration felt the need for a revamped policy in the Asia-Pacific region.

The prospects of engagement were promising in the strategy's early days. The ascension of Deng Xiaoping to leadership of the PRC in the aftermath of Mao's death in 1976 seemed to bolster the potential of successfully improving Sino-American relations, courtesy of Deng's measures 'to reform the economy and open up the society'.¹⁰⁶ In order to proceed with this modernization of China, '[n]ormalization of Sino-American relations' was pursued by Deng so that 'U.S. science, technology, and education' could positively impact China, according to Ezra Vogel.¹⁰⁷ A roadblock to this end was the US relationship with Taiwan, as exemplified through 'the U.S.-Taiwan Mutual Defense Treaty'; the incorporation of Taiwan into mainland China was a primary policy goal of Deng's, and US support – military and otherwise – of Taiwanese independence stood in his way.¹⁰⁸ With Jimmy Carter as US President, negotiations about how to open up Sino-American relations revolved largely around the issue of Taiwan, and on 11 August 1978 the US told Chinese delegates that 'its relations with Taiwan after normalization with the mainland' would be maintained in the areas of 'cultural, commercial, and other relations ... but without official U.S. government representation'.¹⁰⁹ Yet a key problem remained, namely 'whether the United States would continue to sell weapons to Taiwan'; US arms sales, despite the pretence of commerce, served to impede China's progress towards unification and de facto aided Taiwan's independence.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, in December 1978 China conceded the arms sale issue for the time being, and 'the decision on normalization was finalized'.¹¹¹ The negotiations indicate a US strategy of engagement with China was pursued, and this strategy could through the normalization decision claim an early victory by opening up Sino-American relations, which was especially beneficial in the lens of the Cold War as a way to isolate the Soviet Union. Still, the issue of Taiwan did not reach a conclusive solution, deferred rather than dealt with.

¹⁰⁵ Campbell and Ratner, 'The China Reckoning', 61.

¹⁰⁶ Kissinger, *World Order*, 225.

¹⁰⁷ Ezra F. Vogel, 2013, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. First Harvard University Press paperback edition. Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 312.

¹⁰⁸ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 312.

¹⁰⁹ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 323-325.

¹¹⁰ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 325-326.

¹¹¹ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 332-333.

Fareed Zakaria attributes the US stance on the arms sales issue to ‘a combination of engagement and deterrence’ being pursued in US relations with China, the arms sales contributing to a situation where ‘as China rose, its power was checked and its neighbors felt secure’.¹¹² While it is true that there was an element of deterrence involved, it can be argued that this was not the principal concern of US foreign policy: engagement with China was the priority. In the pursuit of this goal, the United States’ relationships with other regional actors, including Taiwan, would need to be balanced against the concern of bringing China into the liberal international fold, and to this end the US had to be prepared for contingencies in China’s foreign policy and discourage the PRC from concentrating its efforts on Taiwanese reunification. Beyond the Taiwan issue, Deng also made plans for and reached agreement on the future reunification of Hong Kong in 1981, which was to take place in 1997 ‘after the lease on the New Territories ran out’, as long as currently governing Britain did not put up any resistance.¹¹³ Perhaps to some extent aiming to counteract a possible Falklands War equivalent arising, Deng claimed in 1982 that ‘Hong Kong would remain a free port and a global financial center ... ruled by Hong Kong people’, alleviating fears that a blooming capitalist hub would be absorbed into and reined in by China’s more authoritarian rule.¹¹⁴ This statement provided the basic principles of ‘the one country, two systems policy – a policy that brought Hong Kong back as part of China, even if it retained a different system’; this transfer of sovereignty yielded nationalistic accomplishments for China, but whilst sovereignty is important for nationalist aspirations, the latter is not the exclusive benefit of sovereignty.¹¹⁵ As with Taiwan, China’s long term ambitions might be masked behind its short term concessions and modesty; gradually, the grip of the state could extend deeper, facilitated by formal sovereignty.

China and the Liberal International Order

How deep was the ideological divide between the US and China at the time of the Berlin Wall’s fall? The most well-known example of how liberal circles reflected on the future of ideology at this moment ought to be Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 essay “The End of History?”,

¹¹² Fareed Zakaria, 2019, ‘The New China Scare: Why America Shouldn’t Panic About Its Latest Challenger’. *Foreign Affairs*, 99(1): 54. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-12-06/new-china-scare> (Accessed: 7 December 2019).

¹¹³ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 493.

¹¹⁴ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 495.

¹¹⁵ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 511.

in which he claims the ‘unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism’.¹¹⁶ The US, at the helm of liberal internationalism, was now ‘the sole superpower’ in a world that had transformed from bipolar during the Cold War to ‘the unipolar moment’ at its resolution.¹¹⁷ On this basis, ‘[t]he Washington Consensus prescribed open trading systems, free movement of capital and central bank monetary discipline’.¹¹⁸ According to Stephen M. Walt, the Washington Consensus was boosted by the American victory in the Cold War and the optimism this fostered towards the American approach to the economy; in order for developing states to subsist in a globalized economy, ‘they would have to become more like the United States’.¹¹⁹ China was still considered a Communist state, but according to Stephen M. Walt there was occasion to think that liberal internationalism would dominate world politics in the years to come, due to ‘the belief that economic globalization was opening the door to a new era of peace and prosperity. The Communist world had embraced the market’.¹²⁰ The US, guided by the principle of engagement in the Sino-American relationship, opened the door for Chinese membership of the WTO, which was eventually established in 2001. China also ‘joined the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation organization in 1991’ and ‘acceded to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1992’.¹²¹ Such developments suggested the power of multilateral institutions to encompass diverse nations within the framework of a liberal international order and rendered plausible the Americans’ notion that China could eventually become ‘a partner rather than a rival’.¹²²

The Washington Consensus was well suited to a world undergoing economic globalization, establishing the US as figurehead of a liberal international order which now seemed to contain the potential to encompass within itself former adversaries such as China. Kissinger argues that globalization led to a ‘global economic impetus ... on removing obstacles to the flow of goods and capital’, which harmonized excellently with the Washington Consensus; but though economies were becoming increasingly interconnected, ‘the political structure of the world has remained based on the nation-state’.¹²³ Globalization entailed the integration of states like China into the liberal order, ‘with new visions and

¹¹⁶ Francis Fukuyama, 1989, ‘The End of History?’. *The National Interest*, (16): 3. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/24027184 (Accessed: 20 September 2019).

¹¹⁷ Ikenberry, ‘The end of liberal international order?’, 18.

¹¹⁸ Edward Luce, 2017, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*. 1st edition. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 29.

¹¹⁹ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 27-28.

¹²⁰ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 27.

¹²¹ Campbell and Ratner, ‘The China Reckoning’, 68.

¹²² Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 25.

¹²³ Kissinger, *World Order*, 368.

agendas'; the order no longer being as self-contained as during the Cold War raised the issue of how the US could address challenges from within as '[r]ising non-western states began to seek a greater voice in the governance of the expanding liberal order'.¹²⁴ As Kissinger points out, the Chinese have 'adhere[d] to rules they had had no part in making' under the assumption that eventually the opportunity to exert greater influence on the composition of international institutions will transpire.¹²⁵ Rather than transforming China into a more open, liberal society through the medium of the liberal international order, a strategy of engagement through institutional integration carried with it the risk of inadvertently transforming the order itself, or at least the United States' position of relatively unchallenged leadership within the order. Perhaps globalization rendered China's integration and the issues it introduced inevitable; yet a US strategy of engagement did little to suppress the possibility of increased Chinese influence. In the early 1990s the gravity of this situation was perhaps less perceptible, as Deng's strategy for China's international relations appeared modest in its objectives; according to Timothy R. Heath, a key axiom for China was to 'hide our capabilities, bide our time, and get some things done'.¹²⁶ Similarly, Stephen Walt describes China's strategy in the period as a 'doctrine of a "peaceful rise"'.¹²⁷

China's incorporation into multilateral institutions did not necessitate an instantaneous transformation into partnership with the US and the adoption of all the liberal order's principles. After all, this was an authoritarian regime who in the year of Fukuyama's essay applied brute force to quell the 4th of June protests at Tiananmen Square, to which the George H. W. Bush administration responded by defying the domestic expectations of 'the press and Congress for a tougher approach' in favour of '[protecting] Sino-U.S. relations', according to M. E. Sarotte.¹²⁸ Ezra Vogel states that '[t]here is no evidence to suggest that Deng showed any hesitation in deciding to send armed troops to Tiananmen Square', his imperative being 'to do whatever was necessary ... to restore order'.¹²⁹ The incident illuminates that keeping domestic control was still integral to China's leadership, despite its ongoing process of modernization; and instead of strongly denouncing China's methods, Bush kept sanctions to a minimum and made several failed attempts to personally contact Deng Xiaoping, after which

¹²⁴ Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', 19.

¹²⁵ Kissinger, *World Order*, 225.

¹²⁶ Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm*, 121-122.

¹²⁷ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 34.

¹²⁸ M. E. Sarotte, 2012, 'China's Fear of Contagion: Tiananmen Square and the Power of the European Example'. *International Security*, 37(2): 177-178. Available at: muse.jhu.edu/article/487180 (Accessed: 20 September 2019).

¹²⁹ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 625.

he sent Brent Scowcroft, National Security Advisor, to Beijing under instructions to follow ‘conciliatory’ conduct.¹³⁰ The response to Tiananmen indicated Bush’s adherence to the engagement policy set in motion by Nixon and Kissinger. While this approach could have been an attempt to keep the possibility of Sino-American partnership afloat and avoid a return to the adversarial relations of the early Cold War, the handling of the incident could have ‘[signalled] clearly to Beijing that it had nothing to worry about from Washington’, as Sarotte points out.¹³¹ In retrospect, allowing China to get away with authoritarian practices without severe retributive measures from the head of the liberal order did little to stifle China’s ambitions and sway it towards conformity with liberal principles, but offers another example of engagement with China being on the US foreign policy agenda and hints at its shortcomings.

In the period preceding the Obama administration, there were instances where engagement came under scrutiny from other branches of government. In February of 1995, the Department of Defense published a report dubbed the Nye Initiative, within which ‘strengthening U.S. bilateral alliances while pursuing new opportunities presented by multilateral security dialogues’ and ‘maintaining forward deployment of U. S. forces and access and basing rights for U. S. and allied forces’ were among the key strategic points towards the Asia-Pacific.¹³² The latter point is justified by the claim that ‘United States military forward presence in the Asia-Pacific region is an essential element of regional security and America’s global military posture’, and a part of this endeavour is specified as to ‘discourage the emergence of a regional hegemon’.¹³³ In a section on China, the report argues that ‘[a]lthough China’s leaders insist their military build-up is defensive and commensurate with China’s overall economic growth, others in the region cannot be certain of China’s intentions ... and its long-term goals are unclear’, advocating for ‘greater transparency in China’s defense programs, strategy and doctrine’.¹³⁴ Based on this, Fareed Zakaria’s argument that US engagement with China was accompanied by deterrence merits some additional treatment when considering the Nye Initiative. He points out that the report ‘warned of China’s military buildup and foreign policy ambitions and announced that the United States would not reduce its military presence in the region. Instead, at least 100,000

¹³⁰ Sarotte, ‘China’s Fear of Contagion’, 177-180.

¹³¹ Sarotte, ‘China’s Fear of Contagion’, 181.

¹³² United States Department of Defense, 1995, *United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*, ii. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA298441> (Accessed: 22 January 2020).

¹³³ United States Department of Defense, *United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*, 23.

¹³⁴ United States Department of Defense, *United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*, 15.

American troops would remain in Asia for the foreseeable future'.¹³⁵ Though subtle in its treatment of the extent of China's threat, the report could indeed be interpreted as calling for deterring China by way of a more comprehensive US military presence in the region and improved bilateral relations with allies such as Japan and South Korea.

It should be noted that Joseph S. Nye Jr., the US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs in 1995 from whom the report derived its moniker, insisted later in the year that '[t]he Clinton administration has a strategy for China that is based on engagement', citing 'dialogue with China on a broad variety of fronts' and attempts 'to establish a new agenda of security and military contacts with China' as evidence for his conclusion that 'engagement is the best strategy' for the Clinton administration.¹³⁶ The US did not abandon its ambitions of transforming China into a potential partner through engagement at this stage, but this does not mean that the US could ignore China's increasing power capabilities. This ambivalence arguably indicates that though there were concerns about China's rise, engagement was viewed as more important than deterrence. Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner offer the interpretation that '[a] combination of U.S. diplomacy and U.S. military power – carrots and sticks – was supposed to persuade Beijing that it was neither possible nor necessary to challenge the U.S.-led security order in Asia'.¹³⁷ The stick that would pressure China to comply with the Asia-Pacific regional status quo was 'enhanced U.S. military power in the region, supported by capable allies and partners'; in this way, the US perceived its policy towards China as engagement ensured by deterrence.¹³⁸

2.3 The 21st Century, China's Challenges and American Priorities

Engagement in a New Era

The new millennium brought with it several unanticipated challenges for the United States, which were to change the dynamics of the Asia-Pacific security situation. This would not be apparent at the onset of the century, which began on a promising note as far as Sino-American relations through engagement were concerned. Under Bill Clinton's presidency in 2000, the passing of H.R.4444 allowed him to 'proclaim the extension of nondiscriminatory treatment

¹³⁵ Zakaria, 'The New China Scare', 54.

¹³⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 1995, 'East Asian Security: The Case for Deep Engagement'. *Foreign Affairs*, 74(4): 100-101. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1995-07-01/east-asian-security-case-deep-engagement> (Accessed: 22 January 2020).

¹³⁷ Campbell and Ratner, 'The China Reckoning', 65.

¹³⁸ Campbell and Ratner, 'The China Reckoning', 65.

(normal trade relations treatment) to the products of that country [the PRC]', to precipitate Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization.¹³⁹ What was known as the U.S.-China Relations Act of 2000 stated the benefits of facilitating Chinese membership of the WTO, which was eventually realized in 2001:

The People's Republic of China, as part of its accession to the World Trade Organization, has committed to eliminating significant trade barriers in the agricultural, services, and manufacturing sectors that, if realized, would provide considerable opportunities for United States farmers, businesses, and workers.¹⁴⁰

The caveat was that 'the United States government must effectively monitor' that China actually adhered to the terms of WTO membership.¹⁴¹ Notwithstanding doubts about whether China would acquiesce with the organization's dictates, the accession was a landmark for US engagement with the PRC; in addition to the economic opportunities afforded to the US by the breakdown of Sino-American economic barriers, the Relations Act indicated that there was no need for a conflict of interests between an emergent China and the US to supplant the twentieth century's dramatic rivalry between East and West. Partnership – and, more importantly, interdependence – through liberal institutions, within which the United States intended to keep the reins, would help subdue any assertive tendencies within the PRC. For this to succeed, the necessary prerequisites were that the United States, not China or other emergent states, continued to be the principal influence on the constitution of liberal institutions, but also that the order of institutions itself continued to be robust, internally consistent, essential and relevant, so that the PRC were unable to look elsewhere for means to maintain its upward trajectory. To this end, if the US were to keep following a policy of engagement with China, the crucial junction in 2001 – when the PRC's ties to the liberal order appeared to be solidifying – would be a suitable time to concentrate its efforts on engagement, and not allow US foreign policy to be distracted from this pursuit.

Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the US entangled itself into the Middle East region by invading Afghanistan and later Iraq. Campbell and Ratner argue that these foreign interventions launched by George W. Bush 'has consumed the U.S. national security apparatus, diverting attention from the changes in Asia at exactly the time China was making enormous military, diplomatic, and commercial strides'.¹⁴² In addition to the Middle

¹³⁹ *Normal Trade Relations for the People's Republic of China*, 2000, Public Law 106-286, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 114: 881.

¹⁴⁰ *Normal Trade Relations for the People's Republic of China*, 901.

¹⁴¹ *Normal Trade Relations for the People's Republic of China*, 901.

¹⁴² Campbell and Ratner, 'The China Reckoning', 69.

East becoming the focal point of US foreign policy, which could well have distracted US policy from developments in China, the wars launched since the war on terror began have ‘through Fiscal Year 2020’ entailed ‘an estimated \$5.4 Trillion in appropriations in current dollars and an additional minimum of \$1 Trillion for US obligations to care for the veterans of these wars through the next several decades’, according to a study by Brown University’s Costs of War project.¹⁴³ The enormous cost of US foreign policy in the Middle East, economic as well as strategic, probably restricted the range of possibilities for US engagement with China in the period, yet the issue was not ignored. In a 2005 speech, Robert Zoellick, the George W. Bush administration’s Deputy Secretary of State at the time, praised the results of US engagement for making the PRC ‘a player at the table’ of ‘the international system’.¹⁴⁴ However, recognizing the potential problems China’s developments could create, Zoellick remarked that ‘China’s rapid military modernization and increases in capabilities raise questions about the purposes of this buildup and China’s lack of transparency’ and that ‘concerns will grow if China seeks to maneuver toward a predominance of power’ in its region.¹⁴⁵ Economically, Zoellick places the blame for ‘a \$162 billion bilateral trade deficit’ on Chinese ‘signs of mercantilism, with policies that seek to direct markets rather than opening them’, suggesting that China’s gains from membership of international markets disproportionately exceed its losses.¹⁴⁶ With this in mind, Zoellick famously remarked:

We now need to encourage China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system. As a responsible stakeholder, China would be more than just a member – it would work with us to sustain the international system that has enabled its success.¹⁴⁷

The speech illustrates that while engagement may have engendered integration of China into the international system, integration was not synonymous with Sino-American partnership as equals: China could afford to withhold its full commitment to the liberal international order for the time being and seek influence beyond the American sphere of interests. In fact, three months later, China attended the first East Asia Summit in Kuala Lumpur, in which ‘regional

¹⁴³ Neta C. Crawford, 2019, *United States Budgetary Costs and Obligations of Post-9/11 Wars through FY2020: \$6.4 Trillion*. Costs of War Project, Watson Institute, Brown University/Pardee Center, Boston University, 1. Available at:

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/US%20Budgetary%20Costs%20of%20Wars%20November%202019.pdf> (Accessed: 24 January 2020).

¹⁴⁴ Robert Zoellick, 2005, ‘Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility: Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations’. Transcript. *NCUSCR Notes from the National Committee*, 34(1): 6. 21 September. Available at:

https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf (Accessed: 30 January 2020).

¹⁴⁵ Zoellick, ‘Whither China?’, 7-8.

¹⁴⁶ Zoellick, ‘Whither China?’, 7.

¹⁴⁷ Zoellick, ‘Whither China?’, 9.

and international political and economic issues as well as ... the challenges facing the region and the world' were discussed, absent the United States.¹⁴⁸ The signs were there that China could be attempting to assert increased regional influence in avenues other than those the United States could offer.

Perhaps perceiving this threat, '[t]he Bush administration sought to balance a rising China by forming a "strategic partnership" with India', according to Stephen Walt.¹⁴⁹ A possible part of this strategy was the agreement ratified in 2008 on nuclear cooperation between the US and India, containing directives seeking to facilitate 'peaceful nuclear cooperation' regarding issues such as 'preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction'; the deal allowed India to partake in 'nuclear trade' for commercial interests not only with the US but also 'where appropriate, trade between third countries'.¹⁵⁰ In a statement upon signing the agreement into law, Bush remarked that '[i]n recent years, we've worked to transform our relationship into a strong strategic partnership', though emphasising the partnership's benefits for 'global nonproliferation efforts' against 'extremists and terrorists' rather than as counterweight to a rising China.¹⁵¹ Whilst the threat of China was overshadowed in rhetoric to the public by the (for the Bush administration) more pertinent topics of nonproliferation and counterterrorism, it is possible that to some extent the US 'embraced India as a nuclear power ... to add yet another check on China', as argued by Fareed Zakaria, considering India is intimidatingly situated to the southwest of China.¹⁵² In the event that China was not willing to become a "responsible stakeholder" of its own accord, improving connections with its neighbours might put pressure on the PRC to reconsider. The United States' policy towards China walked a tightrope between engagement and deterrence, facilitating China's growth through promoting its incorporation into the liberal international order whilst implementing measures such as the Nye Initiative and the nuclear cooperation agreement with India to incite Chinese compliance with its benefactors and relinquish any assertive ambitions. However, China's economic and military endeavours following its

¹⁴⁸ ASEAN, 2012, *Chairman's Statement of the First East Asia Summit Kuala Lumpur, 14 December 2005*. ASEAN.org, 16 May. Available at: https://asean.org/?static_post=chairman-s-statement-of-the-first-east-asia-summit-kuala-lumpur-14-december-2005-2 (Accessed: 30 January 2020).

¹⁴⁹ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 35.

¹⁵⁰ United States Department of State, 2007, *Agreement for Cooperation between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of India concerning peaceful uses of nuclear energy (123 Agreement)*. Available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/aug/90050.htm> (Accessed: 24 January 2020).

¹⁵¹ George W. Bush, 2008, 'Remarks on Signing the United States-India Nuclear Cooperation Approval and Nonproliferation Enhancement Act'. Transcript. *Office of the Federal Register*, WCPD 44: 1319. October 8. Available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/WCPD-2008-10-13/pdf/WCPD-2008-10-13-Pg1318.pdf> (Accessed: 24 January 2020).

¹⁵² Zakaria, 'The New China Scare', 54-56.

emergence reveal that engagement – which generally prevailed over deterrence – was unsuccessful in creating a condition of Sino-American partnership through the liberal international order which was conducive to American primacy.

State Capitalism: An Alternative to the Free Market?

China had – through its authoritarian handling of Tiananmen Square, signs of military buildup, and resistance to comprehensively complying with the norms of liberal economic institutions – indicated that its intentions were never to become like the US or to accommodate American global leadership within the existing, American-led system of institutions, but rather to use its economic growth to make China more influential and more capable of advancing its own interests. Whilst China’s economic growth was a predictable consequence of integration and in line with the purposes of US engagement, the nature of its economic model presented problems for the possibility of liberalizing China, through the model’s divergence from the free market model of the US and the Western world which was a cornerstone of the Washington Consensus. Joshua Kurlantzick’s book *State Capitalism* addresses this issue, defining adherents to the economic model of state capitalism – among which China is a primary proponent – ‘as countries whose government has a [sic] ownership stake in or significant influence over more than one-third of the five hundred largest companies, by revenue, in that country’.¹⁵³ The state’s reach over the economy entails that it ‘sees itself as having a direct role to play in managing the economy and guiding the corporate sector’, yet the model encourages interplay between free market forces and the government, since ‘[t]he new state capitalists have in fact opened their economies to some extent and generally embraced free trade’.¹⁵⁴ It is through this interplay that the model becomes a viable option to the free market approach; Kurlantzick argues that state capitalism’s ‘adaptability’ through the blend of ‘traditional state economic planning with elements of free-market competition’ is the key characteristic that renders the model sustainable, unlike previous attempts at state intervention in the economy which failed in the long-term.¹⁵⁵ Through this combination, an autocratic regime like China can retain satisfactory control of the economy to suit its political needs without suffering economic decline in the process, by reducing the excessive grip that a socialist economy such as Maoist China sustains on its national corporations. Its economic approach yields certain benefits not provided by a free market

¹⁵³ Joshua Kurlantzick, 2016, *State Capitalism: How the Return of Statism is Transforming the World*. 1st edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 9.

¹⁵⁴ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 9 & 11.

¹⁵⁵ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 22.

model; in the area of private enterprise, the effectiveness of China's system has incentivized the establishment of '[l]arge numbers of foreign firms' on Chinese soil, including US, Japanese and Taiwanese businesses, due in part to 'the speed with which decisions can be made and implemented without the burden of complex legal procedures'.¹⁵⁶

If state capitalism proves as resilient as Kurlantzick implies, it gives less credence to assumptions about the limitations of China's economic growth and the country's inevitable integration in the liberal international order. It suggests that US policy-makers must be prepared for the possibility that China will be a long-term geopolitical, as well as economic, contender. How durable the model could be remains to be seen, yet this uncertainty warrants treating state capitalism as a serious contender. Not everyone shares Kurlantzick's worries: as an example of the side of the debate which stresses the free market aspects of China's economy as paramount for the state's economic growth, Weijian Shan argues that 'China has achieved rapid growth in the past 40 years by moving away from the old system of state control of the economy and embracing the market', stressing that 'more than two-thirds of the economy' consists of private enterprise; yet Shan neglects to address how independent this private sector actually is from government influence and control.¹⁵⁷ He contends further that 'the government-controlled sector remains too big, inefficient, wasteful, and moribund', the state in state capitalism constituting more of a detriment than a facilitator of economic success.¹⁵⁸ This narrative vests its belief in the superiority of free-market capitalism, but Kurlantzick's book highlights the importance of taking seriously the possibility that state capitalism could be a sustainable alternative economic model; the free-market economists informing US foreign policy should have entertained this notion and re-examined their preconceptions in light of this challenge, as engagement seems to have been guided by this line of thought.

Another aspect which US policy must address is the danger of state capitalism's proliferation. Kurlantzick claims that '[s]ince the 2008-2009 crisis, China and several smaller countries that have created relatively efficient state capitalism like Singapore have become more vocal about advocating their models of development'.¹⁵⁹ Presumably, perceiving flaws in free-market capitalism bolstered the confidence of China, which had hitherto followed in the footsteps of 'Deng Xiaoping's maxim to keep a low profile in foreign affairs, and denied

¹⁵⁶ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 710.

¹⁵⁷ Shan, 'The Unwinnable Trade War', 107.

¹⁵⁸ Shan, 'The Unwinnable Trade War', 108.

¹⁵⁹ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 78.

they had any model to promote'.¹⁶⁰ In order to gain traction for the state capitalist model, '[b]y the early 2000s, China had already developed training programs for foreign officials, usually from developing nations in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia'.¹⁶¹ From modest beginnings not explicitly advocating state capitalism in their educative content, these programs evolved over the 21st century into vessels of exporting the Chinese economic model:

[M]any of these courses explicitly focused on elements of the China model, from the way Beijing uses its power to allocate loans and grants to certain companies, to China's strategies for co-opting entrepreneurs into the Communist party, to China's use of special economic zones to attract foreign investment.¹⁶²

These programs were framed in a way which conveyed the leeway the state had in implementing economic measures it deemed desirable as compared to the slow process of Western bureaucracy.¹⁶³ Through imparting sentiments of state capitalism's superiority for governance, China hopes that its promotion of the alluring effectiveness and extensive reach that state capitalism affords to its governments could lead to its favourable reception and spread in the East. If China seeks regional hegemony, shoring up support among its neighbours behind an alternative to the Western economic model would provide common ground that could alienate the US in its attempts to influence the conduct of Asian economic institutions, and also facilitate closer economic cooperation between China and the Asia-Pacific. Kurlantzick positions the promotion of China's brand of state capitalism within a larger 'decade-long effort by Beijing to amass soft power in the developing world', a strategy which reached its apex in the dimension of foreign aid when 'China lent more money to developing nations in 2009 and 2010 than the World Bank had'.¹⁶⁴

In sum, China engaged in a multi-faceted effort to exert influence on the developing world and make its own authoritarian political practices, including an economic model which amasses power to the government, seem more legitimate and adoptable. This effort has not been guided by altruistic motives of improving the developing world's conditions, but rather to benefit China's prospects of international influence. Edward Luce offers a relevant analogy, arguing that '[i]n much the same way that Western investment helped bring China into the global system, Chinese investment is now doing the same for Africa and

¹⁶⁰ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 109.

¹⁶¹ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 110.

¹⁶² Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 110.

¹⁶³ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 110.

¹⁶⁴ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 112-113.

elsewhere'.¹⁶⁵ On the American side, engagement with China was meant to foster its acquiescence with the liberal international order and its principles, aided by the ideas of the Washington Consensus; at the very least, China's coexistence with the West within a single economic system generated a level of interdependence that could suspend Chinese ambition. Through its economic intervention and exportation of state capitalism abroad, China might be paving a new path within which it could in the long term bypass its dependence on the liberal international order through benefitting from an order of its own, which would be loyal to a set of principles and practicing an economic model more aligned with Chinese interests. A benchmark of Chinese state capitalism's success is China's economic success, as the ebb and flow of the latter could influence how attractive the economic model seems to its potential followers. Should Chinese economic power continue to grow, an eventual Sino-American Cold War will not constitute an ideological showdown between capitalism and communism, but rather a contest for the future of capitalism in less absolute terms: the extent to which the world subscribes to the state- or individual-oriented model of capitalism respectively.

China's Military Assertiveness and the Issue of Taiwan

The South China Sea and Southeast Asia Security Challenges

Despite China's participation in international institutions, its military actions in the Asia-Pacific illustrated that engagement had not made geopolitics redundant: considerations of geography and power rise to the forefront when attempting to understand why China pursued assertive expansion rather than acquiescing with the rules and norms of the institutional framework it was becoming a part of. Joshua Kurlantzick states that '[s]ince the late 2000s, China has aggressively claimed large portions of the South and East China Seas, begun patrolling in waters far across the Pacific, and refused to take disputed claims over territorial waters to any type of international mediation', but despite this assertiveness in its region China's military ambitions are limited to its proximity, still conceding to the superiority of 'American military power anywhere outside its region'.¹⁶⁶ Stephen Walt agrees that the focus of Chinese military power is increasingly ambitious yet restricted to its vicinity, its territorial claims sparking 'repeated incidents with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan'.¹⁶⁷ China has been moving beyond the relatively tranquil phase of Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy, and the

¹⁶⁵ Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, 32.

¹⁶⁶ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 109.

¹⁶⁷ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 34.

military dimension is but one indicator of this increased assertiveness. As China grew more economically capable, this was correlated with gradually increased military spending, facilitating its more assertive course; in 2007, Reuters reported that ‘China’s [sic] will boost defense spending by 17.8 percent in’ that year, at the time the greatest leap in the PRC’s military expenditures of the 2000s.¹⁶⁸

In the South China Sea, ‘[f]our island groups, including more than two hundred islands, islets, reefs, shoals, and rocks’, among which the Spratly and Paracel Islands are counted, are encompassed within ‘China’s nine-dash line’; the area’s strategic importance derives from its constituting ‘part of the vital route of maritime trade and transport for East Asian and Southeast Asian states and their trading partners in Asia, Africa, and beyond’.¹⁶⁹ Since the turn of the 21st century, China has ‘claimed all the islands, atolls, and waters’ within the line, sparking ‘increasingly tense and pointed exchanges between the ASEAN claimant states and China’.¹⁷⁰ These claims to the South China Sea were most comprehensively put forth in ‘China’s 2009 submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLCS)’, wherein ‘virtually the entire South China Sea’ was proposed to fall under Chinese sovereignty.¹⁷¹ This was also the year in which Barack Obama assumed the US presidency, forcing his administration to come up with an appropriate foreign policy response. This was no easy matter: in a 2013 article, Zhiguo Gao and Bing Bing Jia conclude that ‘the customary law of discovery, occupation, and historic title’ gives China’s nine-dash line in the South China Sea legitimacy in terms of ‘international law’, and that this historical foundation – by virtue of being based on international law – effectively supersedes the dictates of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁷² US efforts to counteract Chinese territorial expansion by way of pressure from international institutions would need to address this complex question of international law and the relationship between history and sovereignty, and present a convincing case about Chinese wrongdoing; if not, the option of containment through bolstering the American military presence in the South China

¹⁶⁸ Chris Buckley, 2007, ‘China’s defense budget to jump 17.8 pct in 2007’. *Reuters*, 4 March. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-military-budget/chinas-defense-budget-to-jump-17-8-pct-in-2007-idUSSP20100020070304> (Accessed: 3 February 2020).

¹⁶⁹ Zhiguo Gao and Bing Bing Jia, 2013, ‘The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications’. *The American Journal of International Law*, 107(1): 99. doi: 10.5305/amerjintlaw.107.1.0098.

¹⁷⁰ David B. H. Denoon, 2017, ‘Introduction’. In *China, The United States, and the Future of Southeast Asia*, edited by David B. H. Denoon, 4. New York: New York University Press.

¹⁷¹ Ann M. Murphy, 2017, ‘ASEAN’s External Policy: Caught between the United States and China’. In *China, The United States, and the Future of Southeast Asia*, edited by David B. H. Denoon, 59-60. New York: New York University Press.

¹⁷² Gao and Jia, ‘The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea’, 123.

Sea becomes relevant, with the entailing tension it creates for Sino-American relations as well as the South Asia region as a whole.

Leaving aside the question of whether China's efforts are justifiable, a relevant question to ask is why China recently has begun asserting its historically rooted claims to territory more fiercely. Its actions suggest an upsurge in confidence in China's ability to practice an assertive foreign policy without causing unacceptably detrimental effects on its relations in areas of trade and security with neighbouring states; a willingness to engage in conflict possibly guided by the assumption that regional hegemony could be feasible in the near term. Chu Shulong argues that China can afford to weather the situation in the South China Sea 'because the parties to the disputes are unlikely to declare war', an argument which can be supported by taking into account economic ties and the difference in military strength between China and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries; the US, however, is able to outcompete China in military areas and is therefore China's primary reason for apprehension.¹⁷³ For Shulong, whether the US constitutes a threat to China seizing the nine-dash line depends on whether 'the U.S. alliance with the Philippines, U.S. positions on the issue, and American interests in sea lanes' are enough to trigger a strong American response.¹⁷⁴

Regarding the US-Philippines alliance, article IV of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty between the two countries assures that in the event of 'an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties', each country is obligated to 'meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes'.¹⁷⁵ Article V of the treaty also specifies what constitutes an attack meriting a response from the treaty partners: 'an armed attack on the metropolitan territory of either of the Parties, or on the island territories under its jurisdiction in the Pacific or on its armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific'.¹⁷⁶ Consequently, should China encroach on territory under the Philippines' sovereignty or engage in direct hostilities towards Philippines military personnel or equipment, the Philippines – and Southeast Asia more broadly – might expect the US to be legally obligated to intervene based on the 1951 treaty.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Chu Shulong, 2017, 'China and the United States in Southeast Asia'. In *China, The United States, and the Future of Southeast Asia*, edited by David B. H. Denoon, 335. New York: New York University Press.

¹⁷⁴ Shulong, 'China and the United States in Southeast Asia', 335.

¹⁷⁵ *Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines*. 30 August 1951. *Avalon Project*. Available at: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp (Accessed: 13 November 2019).

¹⁷⁶ *Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines*.

¹⁷⁷ Michael McDevitt, 2017, 'U.S. Policy Options in the South China Sea'. In *China, The United States, and the Future of Southeast Asia*, edited by David B. H. Denoon, 403. New York: New York University Press.

China might recognize this situation for the time being, and avoid territory belonging under a Southeast Asia nation's formal sovereignty in order to sidestep the possibility of US armed intervention, yet the treaty carries with it the potential for military escalation between the US and China in the event of Chinese overreach, whether the excess be intentional or a misstep. Hence, the US is required to pay close attention to what is going on in the South China Sea, and if it wants to counter China's growing regional influence and military assertiveness it must adopt a course which avoids throwing the region into imbalance or unleashing a Sino-American conflict. In the event that the treaty comes into play, the US could disregard its obligations – but to the possible detriment of regional stability and US relations with ASEAN countries.

Taiwan's Uncertain Future

A key source of tension in the Sino-American relationship has been the geopolitical issue of Taiwan, located off the eastern coast of China. According to James B. Steinberg and Michael E. O'Hanlon, CCP policy of the last half century has pursued the '[c]ompletion of the territorial recovery of China through the unification of Taiwan'.¹⁷⁸ This pursuit seems to be a product of Mao's nationalist vision of a PRC occupying a superior, central position in the world; Steinberg and O'Hanlon identifies the rationale behind Chinese territorial claims in 'a perceived imperative to restore lands "taken" from China during its period of weakness'.¹⁷⁹ Despite the presence of a powerful nationalistic impetus, the issue of Taiwan has not yet evolved into large-scale application of military force to seize the territory, an event which could have disastrous consequences depending on the response of the US who 'insists that any resolution of the dispute between Taipei and Beijing be peaceful and voluntary'.¹⁸⁰ The question is whether a showdown over Taiwan could be more plausible once China increases its military power in the East Asia region. Steinberg and O'Hanlon present some theoretical factors that could explain China's nonconfrontation: 'military weaknesses', fear of US retribution, fear of stifling China's 'economic development', and the idea that an increasingly powerful China will eventually provide enough incentives to boost Taiwanese support for unification on its own accord, which would remove the need for application of force and its detrimental consequences.¹⁸¹ While military confrontation in Taiwan is a worrying possibility

¹⁷⁸ James B. Steinberg and Michael E. O'Hanlon, 2014, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 18.

¹⁷⁹ Steinberg and O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve*, 33.

¹⁸⁰ Steinberg and O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve*, 34-35.

¹⁸¹ Steinberg and O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve*, 34.

if the military balance in East Asia evolves in China's favour, the scenario of reunification through soft power would avoid the potential for military escalation – and in the worst case, war – between the US and China, through circumventing force and avoiding backlash from not only the US, but the international order. If feasible, this seems to be an ideal outcome for China, and allows the US to avoid geopolitics supplanting the policy of engagement.

From Steinberg and O'Hanlon's discussion of US foreign policy on Taiwan, two distinct foreign policy approaches can be denoted: the first is substantial affirmation of Taiwanese independence through 'vigorous political and military support', with the benefits of counteracting the Chinese military's potential to increase its reach in East Asia whilst simultaneously supporting 'Taiwan's vigorous democracy'.¹⁸² The second position, which aligns with engagement, is for the US to limit its involvement with promoting Taiwanese independence, allowing voluntary unification in the hopes that Taiwan could influence China towards economic openness, and the resolution of the tense conflict ensuring future peaceful Sino-American relations.¹⁸³ Taiwanese public opinion on this issue can provide some indications of whether US efforts to promote independence can be successful, or whether Taiwan could feel compelled to pursue reunification with China. In a 2010 study, Richard Sobel et al. describe Taiwan's political landscape as substantially influenced by two parties:

Taiwanese nationalists, led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), advocate a separate Taiwanese national identity and seek permanent separation from China, while Chinese nationalists, led by the Kuomintang Nationalist Party (KMT), oppose movement toward formal Taiwan independence and are more receptive to eventual reunification with China.¹⁸⁴

It follows that US interests align more closely with the DPP, whereas China's more closely align with the KMT. Despite, or perhaps as a result of, the pull between these diametrically opposed parties, 'maintaining the status quo' was the preferred option of a majority of Taiwan's citizens as of 2008.¹⁸⁵

Such trends do little to alleviate the tension that Taiwan entails for Sino-American relations, as neither independence nor unification seems likely to arise out of Taiwan's own efforts in the near future. However, it is possible that recent events such as the Hong Kong protests and China's forceful response could sway public opinion towards a more decisive direction. Sobel et al.'s study provides some interesting findings that opens up this possibility,

¹⁸² Steinberg and O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve*, 70.

¹⁸³ Steinberg and O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve*, 70-71.

¹⁸⁴ Richard Sobel, William-Arthur Haynes and Yu Zheng, 2010, 'The Polls – Trends: Taiwan Public Opinion Trends, 1992-2008: Exploring Attitudes On Cross-Strait Issues'. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 74(4): 783. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/40927167 (Accessed: 8 October 2019).

¹⁸⁵ Sobel, Haynes and Zheng, 'Taiwan Public Opinion Trends', 785-790.

identifying ‘[l]arge jumps in the proportion of independence supporters after China’s missile test in mid-1996 ... and Lee Teng-hui’s “special state-to-state” speech in mid-1999’, which indicates that public opinion on Taiwan’s sovereignty is not stationary and reacts to certain external and internal developments: in this case, ‘cross-Strait tension influenced the Taiwanese to become more independence-minded’.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, KMT’s success in ‘the legislative and presidential elections in early 2008’ was not accompanied by a corresponding sway towards unification, public opinion instead leaning towards ‘status quo’.¹⁸⁷ This suggests firstly that Taiwan seems unlikely to arrive at voluntary unification in the near-term future, which might influence China’s strategy on how to achieve unification in a more assertive direction. Secondly, a more assertive China could push Taiwan towards deeper sentiments for independence, perhaps especially so when considering that China’s military and economic power is expanding, and consequently its threat is greater. In the event, the US could feel impelled to concentrate its efforts on supporting Taiwanese independence and its democracy; alternatively, it could ignore Taiwan’s public opinion, do nothing and risk conceding that the US cannot protect liberal democracy across the globe. The forceful unification of Taiwan would be a critical junction for Sino-American relations and necessitate a decisive policy approach from the incumbent US administration. In the worst case, the scenario could constitute an event where the US administration has to weigh what is more desirable: the continuation of American primacy and regional hegemony in East Asia, or the avoidance of a potentially great Sino-American conflict.

2.4 Conclusions

What these challenges collectively indicate is that as Obama took office, he was greeted by a more confident and assertive China, which rendered engagement with the PRC an increasingly difficult project to maintain. The hopes of integrating the PRC within the liberal international order, and in so doing assuaging its potential to become a competitor, prospered in the early 2000s as China joined the WTO. But throughout the decade, prospects for realizing this outcome were diminished by China’s reinforcing and exporting its state capitalist economic model and pursuing its own course in military matters, even if – as exemplified by its submission of the nine-dash line to the UN – it entailed disregard for the parameters of the institutions it partook in. Engagement with China, on occasion accompanied

¹⁸⁶ Sobel, Haynes and Zheng, ‘Taiwan Public Opinion Trends’, 786.

¹⁸⁷ Sobel, Haynes and Zheng, ‘Taiwan Public Opinion Trends’, 786-791.

by deterrence to restrict Chinese options, did not yield the desirable outcome. China was able to reap the benefits of the institutions it became integrated into, to great economic benefit; simultaneously, it resisted the adoption of aspects of the liberal international order that would require structural transformation, such as implementing a free market economic model and liberal democracy at home. Fusion, not transformation, is the key word to explaining China's economic strategy: free market forces were combined with statism, providing not only a sustainable economic model that ensured enough openness for China to benefit from its WTO accession, but also an alternative approach with which to attract developing states into a Chinese sphere of influence. China's increased economic power were translatable into more substantial military capabilities, renewing the relevance of the issue of Taiwan and allowing China to pursue an assertive course as shown in the South China Sea. The onus was thus on the US to decide if it would allow China to alter the regional balance of power or increase its investment in the American military presence in the Asia-Pacific to counteract increased Chinese influence.

Chapter 3 – The Obama Administration’s Asia-Pacific Policy and the Trans-Pacific Partnership

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the Obama administration’s proposed policy of increasing US engagement with the Asia-Pacific region, guided by the question of whether the administration was transitioning away from the strategy of engagement with China or not. In order to evaluate what the intentions of the administration’s Asia-Pacific policy were, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s article “America’s Pacific Century” will be analysed and discussed in the context of a rising China. Subsequently, the policy’s fate in its application is discussed, with emphasis placed on the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership as the most important element of Obama’s Asia-Pacific policy. As the PRC grew increasingly authoritarian and assertive under the leadership of Xi Jinping, this chapter discusses China’s ambitions and its response to the policies of the Obama administrations in order to explore the prospects of engagement and the state of the Sino-American relationship as Trump took office in 2017.

3.2 Obama and “America’s Pacific Century”

In a November 2009 speech in Tokyo, Barack Obama – calling himself ‘America’s first Pacific President’ – argued that ‘the fortunes of America and the Asia-Pacific have become more closely linked than ever before’, the region constituting an important part of his plan ‘to renew American leadership and pursue a new era of engagement with the world’.¹⁸⁸ His speech proclaimed that ‘the United States looks to strengthen old alliances and build new partnerships’ in the Asia-Pacific; likewise, on the topic of regional multilateral organizations, Obama signified an intention to improve upon the United States’ currently ‘disengaged’ relationship: ‘As an Asia-Pacific nation, the United States expects to be involved in the discussions that shape the future of this region, and to participate fully in appropriate organizations as they are established and evolve’.¹⁸⁹ Regarding how to approach the Sino-

¹⁸⁸ Barack Obama, 2009, ‘President Obama Speaks on the Future of U.S. Leadership in Asia Pacific Region’. *The Obama White House* video, 31:21. 13 November. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/japan-event> (Accessed: 14 January 2020).

¹⁸⁹ Obama, ‘President Obama Speaks on the Future of U.S. Leadership in Asia Pacific Region’.

American relationship, Obama remarked that [c]ultivating spheres of cooperation, not competing spheres of influence, will lead to progress in the Asia-Pacific', but he also suggested that China's 'growing economy is joined by growing responsibility', echoing the message of Robert Zoellick.¹⁹⁰ From its onset, the Obama administration set its sights on engagement with the Asia-Pacific region as a whole; however, its stance on the future of the Sino-American relationship was more complicated than the continuation of engagement. Though evoking the notion of Sino-American cooperation in his speech, the continued rhetoric of attributing China with responsibility to play its part in the liberal international order raises the question of how the US would actually respond if the PRC were to resist this advice in pursuit of its own interests. Would the US forego the line of engagement with China pursued since the 70s, in favour of a more inimical approach? This paper argues that precisely this was already happening at the time of the Obama administration: contrary to the rhetoric of cooperation, Sino-American engagement was in the process of being phased out, and the component of deterrence that ambivalently accompanied it the preceding decades rose to the forefront of US foreign policy.

Jeffrey A. Bader, the Obama administration's senior director for Asia in the National Security Council (NSC), reminisces in a 2012 memoir that 'uncertainties and anxieties shrouded China's emergence' as Obama took office in 2009.¹⁹¹ He claims that the framework for foreign policy of the Obama administration towards China was based on engagement – 'a welcoming approach to China's emergence, influence, and legitimate expanded role' – whilst simultaneously promoting 'an endeavour to shape the Asia-Pacific environment to ensure that China's rise is stabilizing rather than disruptive'.¹⁹² For the US to be able to "shape" the Asia-Pacific, Bader suggests 'developing effective political and security partnerships with other emerging and important actors, including Indonesia, India, and Vietnam', and to 'participate and lead in the most important multilateral organizations in the region', including ASEAN.¹⁹³ As it was becoming clear during the Bush Jr. administration that China was not likely to acquiesce with a "legitimate expanded role", and as 'China's military spending' expanded 'at an even faster pace than its economy', the component of engagement with China in Bader's

¹⁹⁰ Obama, 'President Obama Speaks on the Future of U.S. Leadership in Asia Pacific Region'.

¹⁹¹ Jeffrey A. Bader, 2012, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 3.

¹⁹² Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, 6-7.

¹⁹³ Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, 7-8.

framework rings hollow.¹⁹⁴ Of note is the bid to invest in creating alliances in the region, a geopolitical approach the motives of which might go beyond ensuring regional stability.

From this framework a new policy direction was developed, and in 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton published an article which detailed a “pivot” towards the Asia-Pacific. With the lofty title of “America’s Pacific Century”, the article made the case for ‘substantially increased investment – diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise – in the Asia-Pacific region’.¹⁹⁵ Clinton argues that despite the United States’ heavy investment in the still unresolved Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, a turn inward to focus on ‘domestic priorities’ and a curtailment of US ambitions abroad was not warranted; rather, the US should continue ‘to engage with the world’, and turn to the Asia-Pacific region as the next chapter in America’s postwar history of engagement, a policy approach which would yield reciprocal benefits for both America and the Asia-Pacific.¹⁹⁶ By virtue of continued American predominance in military and economic might, Clinton contends that ‘America has the capacity to secure and sustain our global leadership in this century as we did in the last’, and – recognizing the growing importance of the Asia-Pacific region – suggests the urgency for the US ‘to accelerate efforts to pivot to new global realities’ in order for the American role of global leadership to be sustained.¹⁹⁷ The “pivot” was a call for reorientation, to focus US interests away from the debacle of its Middle East interventions; but the question remains whether this reorientation was guided by aspirations of engagement, as Clinton presents it, or rather as a measure to contain the growing influence of China.

Guided by the overarching goal of continuing engagement in America’s best interests, Clinton elaborates ‘six key lines of action’ along which the pivot policy would proceed:

[S]trengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, *including with China* [emphasis added]; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.¹⁹⁸

On the topic of bilateral alliances, Clinton proposes that the central alliances undergirding the Asia-Pacific pivot consist of ‘Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand’, and that the US must ‘update them for a changing world’.¹⁹⁹ These are existing alliances, which Clinton deems to need modernization in the form of deepening America’s regional

¹⁹⁴ Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise*, 3.

¹⁹⁵ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 57.

¹⁹⁶ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 57-58.

¹⁹⁷ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 63.

¹⁹⁸ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 58.

¹⁹⁹ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 58.

impact, and the proposed measures – in addition to bilateral free trade deals and humanitarian aid – place particular value in security: for example, ‘a new arrangement’ in the Japan partnership involving substantial Japanese investment with the intent ‘to ensure the continued enduring presence of American forces in Japan’.²⁰⁰ Clinton states that the rationale behind upgrading ties with these primary Asia-Pacific allies is to render them ‘operationally and materially capable of deterring provocation from the full spectrum of state and nonstate actors’; among the threats presented are ‘cyberthreats’, ‘North Korea’, and terrorism.²⁰¹ Deterrence thus constitutes part of Clinton’s concerns, in addition to engagement with the many actors in the Asia-Pacific region, but no direct mention is made of China as a threat. The deepening of strategic partnerships is accompanied within Clinton’s framework by increases in both the scope and depth of the United States’ regional military presence, exemplified by suggesting the deployment of more forces in Australia and ‘enhancing our presence in Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean’.²⁰² The rationale offered by Clinton’s article is to ensure the Asia-Pacific’s ‘security and stability’, with deepening America’s military partnerships in the region serving to counteract ‘threats or efforts to undermine regional peace and stability’.²⁰³ China’s assertiveness in pursuing its nine-dash line in the South China Sea certainly destabilized the region, and it is reasonable to argue that this is what Clinton has in mind here, though once again no explicit mention is made.

It is unconvincing that a substantial security component, regionally concentrated in the Asia-Pacific, would be necessary only to address the threats of cyber security, terrorism and North Korea which Clinton mentions; instead, the military component of the reorientation policy can be interpreted as a measure to counter China’s growing military expansion and regional assertiveness. Additionally, China can be identified even in the issues presented by Clinton: regarding North Korea, the PRC was the ‘sole strategic ally’ ensuring the Kim regime’s sustainability at the time of Clinton’s article, through \$5.63 billion trade relations between the two according to Nele Noesselt.²⁰⁴ As for cyberthreats, the issue is intimately connected with China from the American perspective; as an example, Henry Kissinger points out that ‘[t]he United States has appealed to China for restraint in purloining trade secrets via cyber intrusions’.²⁰⁵ Addressing the issue rather than the actor associated with it is merely a

²⁰⁰ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 58.

²⁰¹ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 58-59.

²⁰² Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 62-63.

²⁰³ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 62-63.

²⁰⁴ Nele Noesselt, 2014, ‘China’s contradictory role(s) in world politics: decrypting China’s North Korea strategy’. *Third World Quarterly*, 35(7): 1314. doi: 10.1080/01436597.2014.926120.

²⁰⁵ Kissinger, *World Order*, 347.

way to sidestep explicitly naming China as the reason for increased US military investment in the region. For Clinton to do so would be an admission that engagement was an unsuccessful endeavour, and that US policy towards China could be headed back to the adversity that characterized the Sino-American relationship of the 1950s. At that time, the liberal bloc with the US at the helm was separate from China's sphere in a world of bipolarity. Since the 2000s, however, China's modernization and its WTO admission suggested the state was becoming too firmly entrenched within the liberal international order to pose a great risk of conflict; the partition between the East and the West was seemingly dissolving through economic interconnectedness. The idea that markets were being brought together and authoritarian regimes softened in order to accommodate and survive in the realities of globalization provided reason to dismiss fears of renewed hostility in Sino-American relations, but this had not discouraged China from increasing its ambitions abroad. Clinton is arguably reluctant to acknowledge that deterring China was gaining prevalence over engaging with it in the new Asia-Pacific policy direction, which would entail that China's rise was now being increasingly approached as a geopolitical issue.

Clinton's treatment of the Sino-American relationship's role in the proposed US foreign policy reorientation is similarly evasive; outside of modernizing pre-existing relationships in the areas of bilateral trade and security, Clinton calls for 'emerging partners to join us in shaping and participating in a rules-based regional and global order'.²⁰⁶ Incorporating an emerging China into this order was a key concern of US foreign policy since Nixon, and Clinton continues the rhetoric of engagement by promoting 'cooperation' rather than 'conflict' and claiming that 'a thriving America is good for China' and vice versa; but her article makes no pretense that such an outcome is uncomplicated to arrive at and acknowledges the need to address 'differences' between the US and China.²⁰⁷ Zoellick's concept of China as responsible stakeholder is apparent in Clinton's call for the US and China 'to meet our respective global responsibilities and obligations'.²⁰⁸ This was the crucial next step in order for engagement to succeed in solidifying the liberal international order as durable for the future and the US position in it as paramount, with no feasible alternatives to weaken the American position through competition. However, outside of emphasising US efforts to improve 'transparency' and 'trust' in the Sino-American relationship, Clinton offers few practical measures to integrate China within the framework of increased engagement with

²⁰⁶ Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', 59.

²⁰⁷ Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', 59.

²⁰⁸ Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', 59.

the Asia-Pacific, and focuses instead on desirable hypotheticals: the burden is placed on China to open up to the West and adhere to the liberal international order, by way of measures such as ‘to end unfair discrimination against U.S. and other foreign companies ..., remove preferences for domestic firms, ... allow its currency to appreciate more rapidly’, and endowing the Chinese government with ‘a deep respect for international law and a more open political system’.²⁰⁹ All these demands hinge upon the notion that China is best suited by integrating itself deeper within the mindset of free market capitalism, an assumption which was being challenged by the success of China’s state capitalism. Globalization meant China was interconnected with the global economy, and the US engagement strategy presupposed it would eventually adhere to the rules of the global economy; as the world’s second largest economy, China’s successfully distancing itself from free-market capitalism puts the legitimacy of said rules in question, creating the most significant threat China poses to the liberal international order and the US. If engagement was ineffective, perhaps isolating China, before its model flourishes and creates a Chinese sphere of influence that could challenge US hegemony, was becoming a more attractive option.

The Obama administration was probably aware that engagement with China did not necessitate its transformation into an amicable partner, but rather gave it a position to enhance its economic development as it remained an ambivalent member of liberal institutions such as the WTO. The advancement and proliferation of a distinct economic model for growth, and the testing of boundaries through its actions in the South China Sea, illustrated how China was simultaneously part of and apart from the liberal international order. From this point of departure, the Obama administration sought to restrict China’s ability to continue pursuing its own course. Though increased US military presence in the region hints at deterrence, no element of the Asia-Pacific reorientation policy better illustrates that a departure from engagement with China was actually going on than the US promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The simplest and most telling reason for this is that, according to Georg Löfflmann, ‘China ... has not been part of the TPP negotiations’.²¹⁰ Clinton claims that the purpose of the TPP is to ‘bring together economies from across the Pacific – developed and developing alike – into a single trade community’, with the ultimate goal of bringing about ‘a free trade area of the Asia-Pacific’.²¹¹ The TPP, and crucially the issue of China’s absence from what was a very significant potential free trade zone by virtue of the combined size of

²⁰⁹ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 59-60.

²¹⁰ Löfflmann, ‘The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint’, 97.

²¹¹ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, 62.

the involved participant states, is not elaborated on in Clinton's article, which still – with questionable sincerity – insists upon the possibility of Sino-American cooperation in economic and other areas.

Considering why Clinton advocates for the idea of an Asia-Pacific free trade zone, the US rationale goes beyond altruistic efforts to improve 'the quality of people's lives' in the Asia-Pacific; concentrating the Asia-Pacific powers within a single trading area would solidify a line of deterrence towards China in the economic dimension, perhaps in the hopes of slowing down the economic growth which has brought about its newfound leeway in international relations and the issues this entails.²¹² From the onset, China was never intended to be a part of the TPP, since no feasible measures to incorporate the PRC within the envisioned framework of Asia-Pacific reorientation were offered. What is implicit in Clinton's proposed policy is that the onus is now on China to radically reform its system and join the US, or remain on the outside as America, through its new and renewed Asia-Pacific partnerships and the creation of a free trade zone absent China, progressively isolates and pressures the PRC more strongly. Though not explicitly stated in the article, the policy of Asia-Pacific engagement – by virtue of creating a favourable constellation of US alliances in China's regional vicinity – is accompanied by a policy aimed at deterring and isolating China.

Beyond offering somewhat vague and ambivalent security considerations, Clinton's article also concerns itself with domestic issues, chiefly salvaging the United States' own economy: she presents the notion that 'Asia's growth and dynamism' is the key to 'economic recovery at home', through the region's 'open markets' hosting 'unprecedented opportunities for investment, trade, and access to cutting-edge technology'.²¹³ Clinton concedes that for a policy of 'leadership abroad' – and by extension the Asia-Pacific pivot – to succeed, certain domestic criteria would need to be concurrently addressed and worked towards a resolution: 'increasing our savings, reforming our financial systems, relying less on borrowing, overcoming partisan division'.²¹⁴ Thus, the continuation of American primacy – which requires a solid economic foundation in order to be maintained – was the implicit purpose of the Asia-Pacific pivot. The issue with this prescription is the fact that China is the region's leading economic actor, and its dominance and the influence of the state in its economic model imposes a major roadblock on the United States' capitalizing on the region's growth. If the Asia-Pacific held the key to economic recovery, it follows that a stagnating US could no

²¹² Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', 62.

²¹³ Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', 57.

²¹⁴ Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', 63.

longer afford to bide its time in its pursuit of Sino-American partnership through engagement; it was doubtful that economic reforms would come about in conjunction with China's economic growth. Exacerbating the pressure on the US to compel China towards liberalization was the fact that China's economic growth caused it to supplant Japan by the end of 2010 as runner-up to the US as largest economy.²¹⁵

The desire for America to continue a role of leadership and primacy in international relations, combined with the recognition that economic developments were becoming more conducive to China, brought credence to a policy of deterrence as the most feasible option to counteract China's pulling ahead and growing too powerful and unruly. Regional security partnerships, influence in multilateral forums and the TPP were not primarily measures of Asia-Pacific engagement aimed at regional stability, but measures to isolate China and counteract the growth of a Chinese sphere of influence. Though treatment of the PRC is subdued throughout Clinton's "America's Pacific Century", the article arguably advocates for Asia-Pacific engagement sine China: a threat to isolate and contain China was under serious consideration as a replacement for engagement. The belief vested in the liberal order's institutions to transform China into a more open society appeared to be ebbing as the twenty-first century progressed, if Clinton's article gives an indication of the general outlook of the Obama administration's US foreign policy officials. If China were to adopt the rules of the liberal order, it needed to be forced into a position where this was its only option. Nevertheless, the overall objective of relations with China was still engagement aimed at integrating the PRC within the liberal institutional framework, through engagement with the Asia-Pacific at large in order to ensure the region developed in a direction where the structure of alliances, rules of commerce and institutional framework favoured American and not Chinese interests. Deterrence would thus dominate US policy towards China temporarily, until engagement could reoccupy centre stage once China had no choice but to acquiesce with the framework Obama was attempting to install in the Asia-Pacific. As economic strategy, this meant counteracting the allure of Chinese state capitalism through American-led free-trade agreements with regional actors, of which the pursuit of TPP was the most crucial policy line.

²¹⁵ BBC News, 2011, 'China overtakes Japan as world's second-biggest economy'. *BBC News*, 14 February. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-12427321> (Accessed: 6 April 2020).

3.3 The Trans-Pacific Partnership and China's Response

Free Trade and the Trans-Pacific Partnership

The economic dimension of Obama's foreign policy towards Asia can be linked with the Hamiltonian tradition; there was an attempt to improve America's economic prospects in the world economy, and in so doing improving the economy at home, through developing free trade arrangements with Asian actors. As Georg Löfflmann points out, the economy was growing in the Asia-Pacific region whilst declining in the North American region during Obama's tenure, and this made some kind of economic engagement with the region desirable for US foreign policy – not only for the purposes of deterring China, but 'for a continued American leadership role in shaping the rules of the global economy'.²¹⁶ It was essential that the American economic rules valuing open trade and free markets, not China's alternative of authoritarian state capitalism, gained traction in the Asia-Pacific as the region grew economically. As early as 2010, Obama announced that agreement had been reached on a free trade deal with South Korea; passed in 2012, the deal known as KORUS was meant to increase US exports in order to 'accelerate the economic recovery and create jobs', as stated by the President.²¹⁷ The agreement, which originated during the Bush Jr. administration in 2007, was the subject of controversy: according to Phil Levy, Obama should have been able to produce the final agreement earlier, as the deal was revised due to what he interprets as 'political calculation' over which US businesses to favour in the terms of the agreement.²¹⁸ More importantly, it became a target for the Trump administration further down the line: the deal was renegotiated in 2018 based on the claim that Obama's deal had contributed to a growing trade deficit with South Korea, thus failing at reaching the intended goal of increasing American exports.²¹⁹

Since KORUS had been around since Bush Jr., its passing was not tantamount to a reorientation of US economic foreign policy: it was the proposed multilateral Trans-Pacific Partnership that held the potential to enact more substantial change. The importance that the

²¹⁶ Löfflmann, 'The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint', 97.

²¹⁷ Barack Obama, 2010, 'Remarks by the President at the Announcement of a U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement'. *Office of the Press Secretary*, 4 December. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/04/remarks-president-announcement-a-us-korea-free-trade-agreement> (Accessed: 25 March 2020).

²¹⁸ Phil Levy, 2010, 'Everything you wanted to know about last week's Korea trade agreement, but were afraid to ask'. *Foreign Policy*, 8 December. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/12/08/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-last-weeks-korea-trade-agreement-but-were-afraid-to-ask/> (Accessed: 25 March 2020).

²¹⁹ Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2018, 'Fact Sheet on U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement Outcomes'. 24 September. Available at: <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/fact-sheets/2018/september/fact-sheet-us-korea-free-trade> (Accessed: 25 March 2020).

Obama administration itself placed on the TPP is evident from how it was presented by the Office of the United States Trade Representative; the agency declared it ‘the cornerstone of the Obama Administration’s economic policy in the Asia Pacific’.²²⁰ The aims of the free-trade partnership were to ‘bring most import tariffs on trade within the group to zero over a ten-year period’, boasting an extended scope compared to prior trade deals due to the addition of ‘services, intellectual property, investments, and state-owned enterprises’ within the framework.²²¹ Larry Backer argued in 2014, in response to Japan joining negotiations for the TPP, that both Japan and the US combined economic and strategic motives in their approach to the TPP: ‘[t]he Japanese see the TPP as a counterweight to recent aggressive Chinese efforts to take the lead in determining the scope and shape of bilateral and multilateral relationships in the Pacific’.²²² As for the American strategic rationale behind the TPP, instating the trade zone and its accompanying security alliances as outlined in Clinton’s “pivot” article would amount to what Backer calls ‘a set of double walls around China’:

The first is military, and centers on the creation of a ring of security arrangements of various sorts around China. The second is economic, and aimed at creating a ring of multilateral and bilateral trade arrangements around China that set the economic rules of the game in a way that reflects the preferences of TPP states. More importantly, TPP would add a layer of control to the discourse of international trade regulation that would make it harder for the Chinese to participate effectively in moving the regulatory environment to better align it with its own objectives.²²³

In this way, the US could gain influence in the rules of regional trade and counteract China’s bid for more influence of its own, thus hoping to force the PRC to abandon ambitions of restructuring trade in a more conducive direction from their perspective and instead work towards eventually joining the TPP, requiring reforms of its economic model. The military component elaborates upon the deterrence that had accompanied Sino-American engagement since the 70s, in a more resolute fashion in response to an increasingly assertive China, but courtesy of the credence given to the economic dimension of Obama’s Asia policy, deterrence did not solely rely upon military power. Crucially, the policy of pursuing the TPP continued

²²⁰ Office of the United States Trade Representative, ‘Overview of the Trans Pacific Partnership’. Available at: <https://ustr.gov/tpp/overview-of-the-TPP> (Accessed: 9 April 2019).

²²¹ Bernard K. Gordon, 2011, ‘The Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Rise of China: What Japan Joining the TPP Means for the Region’. *Foreign Affairs*, 7 November. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2011-11-07/trans-pacific-partnership-and-rise-china> (Accessed: 27 March 2020).

²²² Larry Catá Backer, 2014, ‘The Trans-Pacific Partnership: Japan, China, the U.S., and the emerging shape of a new world trade regulatory order’. *Washington University Global Studies Law Review*, 13(1): 65. Available at: <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/wasglo13&i=55> (Accessed: 27 March 2020).

²²³ Backer, ‘The Trans-Pacific Partnership’, 68.

to accommodate and expedite economic globalization, and hinging on the partnership's success, the US could hope to avoid a more geopolitical approach to China's rise such as Mearsheimer's recommended policy of containment. From this it seems that US foreign policy under Obama continued to depend upon the process of globalization and the assumption vested in it that it would help dissolve the issue of China's assertive rise. This was a cause for concern from critics of globalization during the TPP's negotiations, as Backer points out:

It is certainly true that the TPP will accelerate trends, now almost a generation old, that are shifting the frame of power reference up from the people of states safely contained within their borders to the communities of states in which states begin to assume the role that individuals once were said to hold within democratic states. That is a cause of great worry among those who seek to resist this trend at the heart of economic globalization.²²⁴

Whilst beneficial for the objectives of the Obama administration in continuing to approach China with both sticks and carrots, rather than pure geopolitical contest, the pursuit of TPP also brought with it a risk of future domestic backlash.

Backer argued further that '[t]he United States now appears poised to fracture the WTO model in favor of regionally specific but more comprehensive agreements that together might provide a substitute for WTO multilateralism'.²²⁵ Indeed, the legitimacy of the WTO was becoming strained during Obama's tenure, as exemplified by the recurring collapse of the Doha Round wherein WTO members negotiated towards 'trade liberalization and reforms' aiming 'to promote economic growth and improve living standards across the globe' to no avail.²²⁶ For Susan Schwab, the inadequacies of the talks in producing meaningful agreement were a result of 'the Doha Round's failure to address the central question facing international economic governance today: What are the relative roles and responsibilities of advanced (or developed), emerging and developing countries?'.²²⁷ One aspect of this question is what was expected of China's role in the WTO, a concern carried forward from Zoellick to Obama; perhaps faith in the WTO to help bring China into line was already at a low point before the Trump administration more directly challenged the organization. Bernard K. Gordon suggests that the Obama administration, 'frustrated with Doha's stagnation and eager to expand trade and secure alliances', turned towards other avenues than the WTO; first bilateral agreements

²²⁴ Backer, 'The Trans-Pacific Partnership', 58.

²²⁵ Backer, 'The Trans-Pacific Partnership', 59.

²²⁶ Susan C. Schwab, 2011, 'After Doha: Why the Negotiations Are Doomed and What We Should Do About It'. *Foreign Affairs*, 90(3): 104. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2011-04-09/after-doha> (Accessed: 27 March 2020).

²²⁷ Schwab, 'After Doha', 105.

such as KORUS, before placing the TPP at centre stage of economic foreign policy.²²⁸ Thus, it can be argued that the liberal international order of institutions was already beginning to falter in the perceptions of Washington, and Obama's Asia policy was informed by the recognition that the old channels of American influence might not suffice to counteract increased Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific region. A profound sense of urgency was afforded to the issue, which merited exploring different options than those available through the existing institutional order. Nevertheless, the Obama administrations did challenge China through the WTO, as in the election year of 2012 over what the administration viewed as 'illegal export subsidies for cars and car parts'.²²⁹ China, however, raised complaints of their own throughout the Obama administrations, such as in 2012 against 'U.S. anti-subsidy tariffs on Chinese exports'; arguably, this was a reciprocal process of complaints that brought no substantial changes to Chinese practices – changes of the kind that a regional policy could potentially bring about – but also a process which foreshadowed the trade war that would commence once Trump took office and the TPP was abandoned.²³⁰

TPP negotiations were concluded on 3 February 2016, and by then the deal encompassed 12 members across the Pacific: 'Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, United States, and Vietnam'.²³¹ Upon the signing, Obama wrote in an official statement that the 'TPP allows America – and not countries like China – to write the rules of the road in the 21st century', summing up the benefits of the deal: 'TPP will bolster our leadership abroad and support good jobs here at home'.²³² He argued that implementing the TPP free-trade zone, and in so doing diminishing taxation on American exports to the region, would improve what he interpreted as a discriminatory situation where 'the rules of global trade too often undermine our values and put workers and businesses at a disadvantage'.²³³ The statement indicates the divide that was

²²⁸ Bernard K. Gordon, 2012, 'Trading Up in Asia: Why the United States Needs the Trans-Pacific Partnership'. *Foreign Affairs*, 91(4): 17. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2012-07-01/trading-asia> (Accessed: 27 March 2020).

²²⁹ Larry Elliott, 2012, 'Obama takes on China with formal trade complaint over auto subsidies'. *The Guardian*, 17 September. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2012/sep/17/obama-china-trade-war-wto> (Accessed: 6 April 2020).

²³⁰ Tom Miles, 2018, 'China partially wins WTO case over Obama-era U.S. tariffs'. *Reuters*, 21 March. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-trade-wto/china-partially-wins-wto-case-over-obama-era-u-s-tariffs-idUSKBN1GX28D> (Accessed: 6 April 2020).

²³¹ Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2016, 'Trans-Pacific Partnership Ministers' Statement'. 3 February. Available at: <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2016/February/TPP-Ministers-Statement> (Accessed: 27 March 2020).

²³² Barack Obama, 2016, 'Statement by the President on the Signing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership'. *Office of the Press Secretary*, 3 February. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/03/statement-president-signing-trans-pacific-partnership> (Accessed: 27 March 2020).

²³³ Obama, 'Statement by the President on the Signing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership'.

widening between the US and China, and Obama pointing out that the TPP ‘promotes a free and open Internet’ further illuminates how incompatible China’s authoritarian political system was within Obama’s vision for the TPP.²³⁴ Continuing to shape globalization to the interests of the US was the course taken, putting the pressure on China to conform to a revised regional economic order, the rules of which were aimed at reflecting American interests. Additionally, the TPP could help the US economy circumvent its reliance on trade with China, seeing as gridlock in the WTO might have made the organization insufficient as a means of improving conditions from the American point of view. Yet China’s response to Obama’s strategy, and the problems that arose in actually bringing about the different aspects of an Asia-Pacific reorientation, illustrates that the “pivot” might have been an ill-conceived endeavour from US foreign policy.

Xi Jinping’s China

Since engagement with China was meant to produce a loyal partner within the system of international institutions, how did China’s integration compare to the ideal role envisioned by the US? A 2018 report published by the RAND corporation, using the case of China’s membership of the WTO as an example, finds that whilst ‘China has made significant concessions and undertaken policies to comply with key rules’ upon its inception in the organization, the bulk of analysis of the PRC’s later behavior ‘have generally tended to point to China’s determination to promote its national interests within a loosely defined scope of the WTO’.²³⁵ Issues where the PRC has been a less than ideal partner include ‘formal state programs designed to obtain IP [intellectual property] through surreptitious means, including cyber espionage’, demands on ‘foreign firms to transfer technology as a condition for access to its market’, and ‘[s]tate support to key industries’.²³⁶ All these measures serve ‘to gain competitive trade advantage’ for the PRC by virtue of its continuation of its authoritarian state capitalist model, rendering this a key issue in terms of conflict between American and Chinese interests within the international order.²³⁷ Despite this, the report argues for a more tempered interpretation in that China is not alone in disregarding certain conventions within the WTO, and that ‘China has made hundreds of specific rule and policy concessions as a part

²³⁴ Obama, ‘Statement by the President on the Signing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership’.

²³⁵ Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, 2018, *China and the International Order*. E-book. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 52. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2423.html (Accessed: 30 August 2019).

²³⁶ Mazarr, Heath and Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, 52-55.

²³⁷ Mazarr, Heath and Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, 55.

of its WTO accession process'.²³⁸ As pointed out, the WTO might have been witnessing deterioration in its ability to outline and instigate consensus on rules applicable across the board, hence Obama's turn towards a different approach through the TPP. In so doing, Obama's Asia policy illustrated a case of national interests beginning to supersede the international, and it was thus a sign of the American idealist consensus modestly retreating: though American support of internationalism was redirected rather than abandoned, the existing order was becoming insufficient to aid American interests, primarily those in the economic sphere in the wake of a financial crisis which the Chinese model had – worryingly for Washington – endured.²³⁹

China's actions in the WTO reflected the growing impact of the state in China's economy; Kurlantzick argues that 'since the mid-2000s, ... Beijing has been aggressively tightening government management of leading companies', counteracting the pull towards open markets and a diminished degree of state influence over the economy that China's WTO accession and the American engagement policy with the PRC was intended to enact.²⁴⁰ China's unwillingness to transform the economy in a more open direction was not unreasonable: as Thomas Christensen finds, 'China weathered the financial crisis much better than the United States and other great powers, increasing its confidence in international interactions'.²⁴¹ Why would the PRC abandon an economic approach more conducive to an authoritarian regime, in favour of deeper integration to the international order on American premises? In spite of this, it might have seemed initially like leadership transition in China could push it towards a direction more amicable to the US. Timothy R. Heath argues in a 2014 book that following Xi Jinping's becoming head of state of the PRC in 2013, his 'administration has moved quickly to centralize power to push through systemic reform and subdue vested interests'.²⁴² The basis for the move towards reform was the CCP's 18th Party Congress, held in 2012, which Heath argues 'stood out in its requirement to consolidate the foundations for the nation's continued rise and accumulation of national power through the establishment and reform of an array of economic, social, and political "institutions" (*zhidu*) and "systems" (*tixi*)'.²⁴³ As for the PRC's foreign policy objectives, Heath finds that 'PRC leaders have explained that consolidation of China's influence throughout Asia is essential for

²³⁸ Mazarr, Heath and Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, 54.

²³⁹ Thomas J. Christensen, 2015, 'Obama and Asia: Confronting the China Challenge'. *Foreign Affairs*, 94(5): 28. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/obama-and-asia> (Accessed: 30 March 2020).

²⁴⁰ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 3.

²⁴¹ Christensen, 'Obama and Asia', 28.

²⁴² Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm*, 134.

²⁴³ Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm*, 135.

the country's rise a great power [sic]', and this has led Xi to emphasise 'the importance of diplomatic relations with the region'.²⁴⁴

The promise of reform led Xi to insist in 2013 that '[m]arket forces, rather than the state, would now play a "decisive role" in the Chinese economy'; but Joshua Kurlantzick finds that these were empty promises, and that Xi Jinping's administration 'has taken back control of many parts of the economy, such as energy and commodities and information technology'.²⁴⁵ The centralization of power under Xi was not intended to support reforms affording increased influence to the private sector, but rather buttress state control over the economy and reinforce its state capitalist model: as Kurlantzick finds, '[e]ven under supposed reformist Xi Jinping, Beijing has been boosting state interventions in equity markets and increasing state subsidies to preferred firms in industries it considers critical'.²⁴⁶ Through this lens, Xi Jinping's supposedly reformist agenda can be interpreted as a deepening of authoritarianism, pulling further away from the liberalization that American engagement with China envisioned. As a 2019 piece in *The National Interest* points out, this authoritarianism extends beyond the statist economy: the ongoing implementation of a domestic system of "social credit", the 2018 removal of term limits for Presidency, and 'a systematic purge of the Party's ranks in the name of combating corruption' signifies that China's reforms are unambiguously aimed away from, rather than towards, a more open, liberal society.²⁴⁷ The RAND Corporation's report finds that 'as the balance of power is expected to shift over time and the effects of investments in soft and hard power bear fruit, Chinese officials and thinkers anticipate opportunities to change or supplement existing institutions and organizations with Chinese-led alternatives'; rather than intending to conform to a US-led order, the real debate within China on its future role in international relations concerns 'whether Beijing should seek to establish an alternative system or continue to reform the existing order'.²⁴⁸

In 2013, Xi Jinping announced the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, an infrastructure project comprising 'the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road'.²⁴⁹ The former component sought to establish 'a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, both westward—through the mountainous

²⁴⁴ Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm*, 120.

²⁴⁵ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 1-3.

²⁴⁶ Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism*, 3.

²⁴⁷ Ted G. Carpenter, 2019, 'Prepare for a More Authoritarian China'. *The National Interest*, 3 August. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/prepare-more-authoritarian-china-70861> (Accessed: 30 March 2020).

²⁴⁸ Mazarr, Heath and Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, 78.

²⁴⁹ Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, 2020, 'China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative'. *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated 28 January. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative> (Accessed: 31 March 2020).

former Soviet republics—and southward, to Pakistan, India, and the rest of Southeast Asia’, whilst the latter involved ‘port development along the Indian Ocean, from Southeast Asia all the way to East Africa and parts of Europe’.²⁵⁰ Georg Löfflmann argues that ‘cooperative engagement with US allies and partners in the region has in turn fueled Chinese fears of American containment, resulting in geopolitical and geo-economic counter-measures aimed against US hegemony in the region’.²⁵¹ The Silk Road projects, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), might have been one such countermeasure proposed in response to the TPP; China remained on the outskirts of the TPP, since membership would entail adhering to rules necessitating concessions in the scope of the state’s control of the market, according to Löfflmann.²⁵² An Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was founded in 2014 in support of the BRI, in which ‘China is the largest shareholder of the 56 states that are founding members’; according to Cheng-yi Lin, ‘Xi Jinping is now able to nullify tacit boycotts from the USA and Japan and compete for their global and regional financial leadership’, integrating both developing and developed states from all regions into an institution ‘which funds Asian transportation and infrastructure projects’.²⁵³ In addition to the BRI, talks for a ‘Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership’ (RCEP) began in 2012 between the initiative-taker China, ASEAN and important external ASEAN members including Japan and India, proposing a competing ‘free-trade agreement’ excluding the United States and on terms more conducive to China.²⁵⁴ As Campbell and Ratner put it, ‘China has also set out to build its own set of regional and international institutions – with the United States on the outside looking in – rather than deepening its commitment to the existing ones’.²⁵⁵ The foundations of Sino-American competition were beginning to take shape: the selective engagement with Asia outlined in Obama’s Asia policy sought to deter China from pursuing its own course and dissuade it from building a sphere of influence in Asia, whilst hoping to avoid the deterioration of Sino-American relations and the need for a more geopolitical foreign policy approach. Yet China’s response reflected that such a strategy had only served to accelerate its decisiveness in seeking regional influence through institutions

²⁵⁰ Chatzky and McBride, ‘China’s Massive Belt and Road Initiative’.

²⁵¹ Löfflmann, ‘The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint’, 93.

²⁵² Löfflmann, ‘The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint’, 98.

²⁵³ Cheng-yi Lin, 2016, ‘Chinese Response to Obama’s Rebalancing to Asia Strategy’. In *Asia Pacific Countries and the US Rebalancing Strategy*, edited by David W.F. Huang, 91-92. E-book. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. doi: 10.1057/978-1-349-93453-9.

²⁵⁴ Löfflmann, ‘The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint’, 98.

²⁵⁵ Campbell and Ratner, ‘The China Reckoning’, 68.

independent of American rules, in turn contributing to a deepening divide solidifying between the two great powers.

3.4 China's Continued Military Assertiveness and the Asia-Pacific Security Situation

The Divergence Between Rhetoric and Reality in the Military "Pivot"

The Obama administration's military reorientation entailed that 'from 2020 onwards, the US Navy would have 60 percent of its forces stationed in the Pacific, compared to a previous rough parity of forces between the Atlantic and the Pacific'.²⁵⁶ Georg Löffmann interprets this decision as a means of 'deterring the People's Republic and maintaining America's traditional position of military preeminence'.²⁵⁷ The Sino-American relationship after the Cold War historically contained a component of deterrence, but the Obama administration might have excessively emphasised that aspect of policy towards China, if continued engagement with China was the intent: Löffmann argues further that the PRC interpreted Obama's Asia policy 'as policy of containment and threat to its own security interests'.²⁵⁸ The intent of the Obama administration was not to produce an adversary in China and create a security challenge, but since engagement had not engendered transformation so far, the administration might have envisioned that applying more pressure would cause engagement to finally reach its objectives and quell Chinese ambitions. It can be argued that idealist assumptions – that China would eventually come around and affirm an institutional system primarily based on American "universal" values – were still predominant even as a more realist policy approach was conceived, leading the Obama administration to miscalculate China's response and overprioritize deterrence, notably through the military dimension of Asia policy. That containment was not the American intention is evidenced by how the US tried to avoid alienating China amidst its military reorientation to Asia, by way of 'the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement or the establishment of new joint mechanisms', but these measures 'had only a limited effect in dampening tensions', according to Löffmann.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Löffmann, 'The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint', 99.

²⁵⁷ Löffmann, 'The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint', 100.

²⁵⁸ Löffmann, 'The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint', 101.

²⁵⁹ Löffmann, 'The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint', 101.

Thus, under Xi Jinping, China's already accelerating military capabilities and assertiveness were further expanded upon: Reuters reported in November of 2013 that China's navy was 'rapidly expanding ... driving a seismic shift in Asia's military balance', and that beyond continuing to profess its nine-dash line in the South China Sea, the Chinese navy had become 'a permanent presence near or passing through the Japanese islands'.²⁶⁰ The East China Sea was also subject to Chinese assertiveness, even before Xi Jinping: in 2010, a collision between a Chinese fishing vessel and the Japanese coast guard near the disputed Senkaku Islands led to Japan arresting the Chinese captain, who was eventually released following pressure from Chinese authorities in the form of 'blocking exports of rare earths ... and detaining four Japanese construction company workers in the Chinese province of Hebei'.²⁶¹ Another telling sign of China's confidence was the 2015 discovery of how the Spratly Islands were being converted from 'miniscule Chinese-occupied outcroppings' to larger artificial islands boasting 'harbors, large multi-story buildings, airstrips, and other government facilities'.²⁶² The intention, according to Andrew Erickson and Conor Kennedy, was to advance 'its ability to monitor, bully, and even project force against its neighbors'.²⁶³ China was ramping up its ambitions of being the predominant power in the Asia-Pacific, seemingly undaunted by American intentions to reinforce its regional military presence.

Georg Löfflmann contends that '[u]nder President Obama, expansive liberal-internationalist goals are frequently paired up with limited means and realpolitik considerations, producing a strategic mismatch between stated geopolitical ambitions and the actual involvement of American engagement'.²⁶⁴ This interpretation highlights that despite the rhetorical device of a "pivot" suggesting an extensive US investment in Asia, the US did not necessarily afford the means to decisively pursue the direction outlined: '[w]ith the Budget Control Act of 2011 and the onset of sequestration in 2013, the Pentagon would ultimately face a reduction in previously planned defense spending levels of about \$1 trillion over ten years, compared to original estimates'.²⁶⁵ According to Campbell and Ratner, 'at the

²⁶⁰ David Lague, 2013, 'Special Report: China's navy breaks out to the high seas'. *Reuters*, 27 November. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-navy-specialreport/special-report-chinas-navy-breaks-out-to-the-high-seas-idUSBRE9AQ04220131127> (Accessed: 1 April 2020).

²⁶¹ Tsuneo "Nabe" Watanabe, 2016, 'Japan's "Proactive Contribution" and the US Rebalancing Policy'. In *Asia Pacific Countries and the US Rebalancing Strategy*, edited by David W.F. Huang, 106-107. E-book. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. doi: 10.1057/978-1-349-93453-9.

²⁶² Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, 2015, 'China's Island Builders: The People's War At Sea'. *Foreign Affairs*, 9 April. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2015-04-09/china-s-island-builders> (Accessed: 30 March 2020).

²⁶³ Erickson and Kennedy, 'China's Island Builders'.

²⁶⁴ Löfflmann, 'The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint', 93.

²⁶⁵ Löfflmann, 'The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint', 94.

end of Obama's time in office, budgets and personnel remained focused on other regions – there were, for example, three times as many National Security Council staffers working on the Middle East as on all of East and Southeast Asia'.²⁶⁶ The entanglement that Hillary Clinton intended to steer US foreign policy away from continued to affect US strategic leeway throughout the Obama administration. This is exemplified by how the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria terrorist organization spawned a new chapter in the United States' ill-advised counterterrorism policy of the 21st century, after 'the group seized power in portions of western Iraq and Syria in 2014'; as Walt puts it, 'the war on terror kept expanding and the number of enemies kept growing'.²⁶⁷ The expansiveness of American foreign policy goals, arising from the idealist consensus, had spread American obligations and priorities too broadly around the world to deeply concentrate attention in the Asia-Pacific. Thus, the military "pivot" never materialized fully as envisioned; but this did not reverse the distrust the proposed military reorientation had fostered in China's perception of American intentions, exacerbated by the competitive search for economic alternatives that China undertook in response to its interests being alienated in the American vision of the region's future architecture, a key example being the TPP negotiations and how Chinese participation would require liberalizing reforms and abandonment of China's promising state capitalist model. The Sino-American relationship soured and grew further away from reconciliation during the Obama administration, bringing an end to the feasibility of continuing the policy of Sino-American engagement.

Obama's and Xi Jinping's Bilateral Security Arrangements in Asia

In light of prospects for Sino-American engagement having grown dim, it is relevant to briefly review the developments in bilateral security arrangements that Obama's Asia policy brought about. The relationship between the US and Japan was improved upon courtesy of the Obama administration's Asia policy and the stance of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose government passed a law on the 19 September 2015 which bypassed Japan's constitutional restraints in order to expand 'the right of collective defense', or the situations where the 'Japan Self-Defense Forces' could be deployed.²⁶⁸ Tsuneo Watanabe points out that such instances 'are limited to only regional contingencies that would critically affect Japan's security', and that its scope of involvement is constrained 'to noncombatant activities, such as

²⁶⁶ Campbell and Ratner, 'The China Reckoning', 69-70.

²⁶⁷ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 49-50.

²⁶⁸ Watanabe, 'Japan's "Proactive Contribution"', 103.

logistical support of Japan's major ally, the USA, and allied nations'.²⁶⁹ Watanabe argues that the objectives of Abe and Obama were relatively aligned in terms of responding to China's assertive rise, making the idea of an American Asia-Pacific reorientation well received by the Japanese government, and that 'Japanese political elites and a majority of public realized the need for the new security legislation to strengthen Japan's defense capabilities and to enhance collaboration with the US military'.²⁷⁰ Georg Löffmann states that beyond the improved security relations with Japan, 'South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand' were among the pre-existing bilateral relationships which were bolstered following the onset of Obama's Asia policy; in US-Australia relations this is reflected by 'agreement to station around 2,500 US Marines in Darwin on a rotational basis', and in US-Philippines relations 'an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) allowing the US to conduct operations and temporarily station troops on Philippine territory' was reached; both agreements came into effect in 2014.²⁷¹

As for China, beyond the influence sought through constructing and leading an institutional framework for Asia through the BRI, the AIIB and the RCEP, developments may have been occurring in the bilateral relationship between Xi's China and Putin's Russia: according to Cheng-yi Lin, 'Xi Jinping abstained from criticizing Moscow's policy toward Ukraine and annexation of Crimean in 2014, and joined Putin at the 70th anniversary of the World War II parade in Moscow in 2015 while many Western leaders boycotted the event'.²⁷² Stephen M. Walt claims that 'Russian president Vladimir Putin spoke openly of a "special relationship" between the two states' at the 2015 meeting, arguing that the two major Asian powers have begun to 'share intelligence and military technology, conduct joint military exercises, sign a number of long-term oil and gas development deals, and coordinate diplomatic positions within the UN Security Council'.²⁷³ As China and Russia grew closer, so too did the US and India: Löffmann argues that '[u]nder Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's traditional strategic stance of "non-alignment" seems to have given way toward a closer cooperation with the United States in the face of multiple security threats and, above all, the rise of China'.²⁷⁴ At a 27 January 2015 address in New Delhi, Obama remarked that '[t]he United States welcomes a greater role for India in the Asia-Pacific, where the freedom

²⁶⁹ Watanabe, 'Japan's "Proactive Contribution"', 103.

²⁷⁰ Watanabe, 'Japan's "Proactive Contribution"', 116.

²⁷¹ Löffmann, 'The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint', 95.

²⁷² Lin, 'Chinese Response to Obama's Rebalancing to Asia Strategy', 92.

²⁷³ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 35-36.

²⁷⁴ Löffmann, 'The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint', 97.

of navigation must be upheld and disputes must be resolved peacefully’, likely referring to Chinese maritime assertiveness.²⁷⁵ Concurrently, Obama and Modi agreed ‘to renew a 10-year defense pact between the two countries, allowing the transfer of American armaments technology to India, the joint development and co-production of defense products in India, and collaboration on counterterrorism, security, and regional stability’, beginning the trajectory of an ‘emerging strategic partnership’.²⁷⁶ Thus, accompanying the evolving Sino-American contest to influence the future institutional and economic framework of the Asia-Pacific were important developments in the security situation in the Asia-Pacific, with new partnerships forming beyond old alliances. As for why this was occurring, one might consider Stephen Walt’s argument that by the end of the Obama administration ‘it was increasingly clear that the world’s two most powerful countries were headed for an intense security competition’.²⁷⁷

3.5 A Closer Look at the United States’ and China’s Relationships With ASEAN

In light of the continued Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, Obama’s policy towards Southeast Asia merits a discussion: the Obama administration sought to deepen ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), comprising 10 countries in Southeast Asia including Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam. A current overview from the ASEAN Secretariat lists several tenets of US-ASEAN partnership in political, security and economic areas, a partnership which has gradually expanded following its 1977 inception; the political-security component is reflected by America’s ‘active participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the East Asia Summit (EAS)’, with the intention to cooperate on central issues such as ‘maritime security, cyber security, and combatting transnational crime’.²⁷⁸ Regarding economic partnership, the document states the US is ‘the third largest trading partner of ASEAN among Dialogue Partners’ and ‘ASEAN’s fourth largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI)

²⁷⁵ Barack Obama, 2015, ‘Remarks by President Obama in Address to the People of India’. *Office of the Press Secretary*, 27 January. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/27/remarks-president-obama-address-people-india> (Accessed: 6 April 2020).

²⁷⁶ Löffmann, ‘The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint’, 97.

²⁷⁷ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 35.

²⁷⁸ ASEAN Secretariat’s Information Paper, 2018, *Overview of ASEAN-United States Dialogue Relations*. ASEAN.org, 26 June 2018, 1. Available at: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2018.06.-Overview-of-ASEAN-US-Dialogue-Relations-shortened-as-of-26June2018.pdf> (Accessed: 10 October 2019).

among Dialogue Partners in 2017’, whilst listing measures to facilitate even closer economic cooperation through trade and investment in the future.²⁷⁹

Obama became the first American President to attend the East Asia Summit in 2011, which the White House reported as a step towards ‘deepening engagement in the Asia-Pacific region and playing a leadership role in its emerging institutions’; despite this lofty sentiment, Russia also attended its first summit that year, suggesting the new American presence did not distinguish American policy from what other states were doing to the extent that a “pivot” would be an accurate description.²⁸⁰ Nevertheless, attempts to improve the relationship with ASEAN was an important part of US engagement with multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific, and in 2015 plans were agreed upon to strengthen an ASEAN-U.S. strategic partnership, focusing on ‘economic integration, maritime cooperation, transnational challenges including climate change, emerging leaders, and women’s opportunities’.²⁸¹ These measures arguably signify intent to integrate the norms of liberal institutionalism into the Asia-Pacific regional framework of institutions. The problem was that China had close ties of its own with the organization, with a strategic partnership of its own which both sides intended to reinforce in 2015: a key point in terms of furthering economic integration was intentions of improving an ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement.²⁸² US attempts to improve its regional influence through ties with ASEAN were thus balanced out by the organization continuing to afford China an integral role in Southeast Asia. This trend did not reverse following Obama’s pivot: at present, China is still currently more economically integral than the US, being ‘ASEAN’s largest trading partner, third largest external source of foreign direct investment [sic]’.²⁸³ Like the US, it is involved in the ARF, ADMM-Plus and East Asia Summit, with the addition of ‘ASEAN Plus Three (APT)’ and ‘ASEAN Plus One’, the latter being concerned with China-ASEAN ‘summit, ministerial and senior officials’ meetings’.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁹ ASEAN Secretariat’s Information Paper, *Overview of ASEAN-United States Dialogue Relations*, 1-2.

²⁸⁰ The White House, 2011, ‘Fact Sheet: East Asia Summit’. *Office of the Press Secretary*, 19 November. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/19/fact-sheet-east-asia-summit> (Accessed: 1 April 2020).

²⁸¹ ASEAN, 2015, *Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership (2016-2020)*. ASEAN.org, November. Available at: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/27th-summit/statement/ASEAN-US%20POA%202016-2020_Adopted.pdf (Accessed: 1 April 2020).

²⁸² ASEAN Secretariat News, 2015, ‘ASEAN, China Reaffirm Commitment to Strategic Partnership’. ASEAN.org, 8 June. Available at: <https://asean.org/asean-china-reaffirm-commitment-to-strategic-partnership/?highlight=strategic%20partnership> (Accessed: 1 April 2020).

²⁸³ ASEAN Secretariat’s Information Paper, 2019, *Overview of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations*. ASEAN.org, July 2019, 2. Available at: https://asean.org/storage/2012/05/Overview-of-ASEAN-China-Relations-Jul-2019_For-Web_Rev.pdf (Accessed: 10 October 2019).

²⁸⁴ ASEAN Secretariat’s Information Paper, *Overview of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations*, 1.

Whilst the US is an important partner of ASEAN's, it is not the sole external influence, and depending on how much weight to assign to the economic dimension, ASEAN is more dependent on its partnership with China than on its US equivalent. Chen Shaofeng claims that 'ASEAN's rise would hardly be possible without an economically fast-growing China', and that 'the Chinese market has become a safety valve for its Southeast Asian countries'.²⁸⁵ This has created a state of economic dependence on China within ASEAN which in turn inhibits the range of available policy responses to China's actions in the South China Sea. David B. H. Denoon argues that 'ASEAN as an organization is split between links to China, a preferred avoidance of commitment by several states, and quiet, informal relations with the United States', illustrating that its position of dependence on China has left ASEAN between a rock and a hard place.²⁸⁶ Ann Marie Murphy similarly concludes her review of ASEAN's external policy by describing an ambivalent ASEAN torn between 'regional stability and autonomy from great power influence', owing largely to conflicting interests within the organization itself; although China is encroaching on territories to which certain ASEAN member states have a claim, states not affected territorially seek to maintain order and avoid the repercussions that could arise from making an adversary out of a strong China.²⁸⁷ Further complicating matters is 'two informal groupings of countries' within ASEAN, roughly divided by a group of northern states in the vicinity of China who are 'informally aligned with China' and a group of southern states who 'either seeks nonalignment or has informal links with outside major powers', such as the US.²⁸⁸

If, as Löffmann argued, American intentions with its military reorientation were to maintain control of the region, requiring counteracting Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, it follows that the attempts to deepen the partnership with ASEAN was in part meant to contribute to deterring China from pursuing an expansive military policy aimed at becoming the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific. A major problem that arises is how ASEAN countries, dependent as they are on China, can be convinced of the desirability of deepening their ties with the US, which would amount to substituting dependence on a great power in its vicinity for another across the ocean. Whilst Obama did improve the United States' ties with ASEAN, compared to China's ties – already strong and in the process of

²⁸⁵ Chen Shaofeng, 2017, 'China's Economic Approach to ASEAN'. In *China, The United States, and the Future of Southeast Asia*, edited by David B. H. Denoon, 317. New York: New York University Press.

²⁸⁶ Denoon, 'Introduction', 8.

²⁸⁷ Murphy, 'ASEAN's External Policy', 73.

²⁸⁸ David B. H. Denoon, 2017, 'Conclusion'. In *China, The United States, and the Future of Southeast Asia*, edited by David B. H. Denoon, 425. New York: New York University Press.

further strengthening – the US-ASEAN relationship was not yet substantial enough to univocally sway Southeast Asia into the American sphere. The challenges described in the above complicate US attempts to form deeper alliances with ASEAN countries, as the organization as a whole would not necessarily be receptive to US attempts to control its course, due to its internal division. One might be tempted to draw an analogy between a situation where the US attempts to sway ASEAN countries away from Chinese influence and the Cold War’s power struggle between the US and the Soviet Union for influence over the developing world: ASEAN countries would be torn between the opposing wills of great powers. However, the resemblance is somewhat thin since ideology was at the forefront of the earlier endeavour, and since the side of ASEAN that values organizational autonomy might reject excessive US interference. Nevertheless, China’s prospects for regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific might be aided by creating dependence from Southeast Asian states, and its efforts to consolidate the nine-dash line exacerbates the pressure on ASEAN to eventually reach a decision on whether the organization’s future lies primarily within itself, with the US or with China, in order to alleviate the unresolved regional tension. To this end, Obama succeeded in taking the first steps towards providing ASEAN with an alternative to China, though much more work would be required for future administrations in order to make it feasible for the organization to bypass its deep dependency on China, not to mention the complexity of establishing consensus amongst ASEAN countries on the American option being preferable to siding with China or counteracting the influence of great powers altogether.

3.6 Conclusions

The Obama administration presented a vision of America’s future as the most influential power in the Asia-Pacific, where the region’s institutional framework more closely aligned with American rather than Chinese interests. The administration sought to counteract Chinese influence in the region before it materialized – by virtue of regional actors’ dependence on trade relations and alliances with a rising great power – into a separate Chinese sphere of influence, which in turn could afford China more credence in shaping the future global institutional order. This policy direction could have been derived from worries that China was growing more powerful without committing to the dictates of liberal international order, as its deepening of state capitalism rather than removal of interference with the forces of the free market and increased military assertiveness suggested. By increasing American influence in

the Asia-Pacific region through a combination of diplomatic, military and economic means, the idea was to engender a situation where China would have to reform and liberalize in order to accommodate the American-led regional framework, or remain on the outskirts of it and witness economic decline through increased isolation. To this end, the TPP – the administration’s self-declared cornerstone of Asia-Pacific economic policy – was crucial, both for the continuation of economic globalization and for the deterrence of China. Of the various components of Obama’s foreign policy, it was this proposed partnership that carried the greatest potential for rejuvenating Sino-American engagement: as Victor Cha points out, if the partnership were to survive the transition of US leadership, it could ‘create conformity on labor, the environment, food safety, intellectual property, cybersecurity, the digital economy, development, and other standards’ amongst its twelve participants, creating an effective counterweight to China’s economic rise and sparking the impetus for liberalization of Xi’s regime if the isolation brought by the TPP compelled it – by necessity – to integrate itself within the partnership and its rules.²⁸⁹

But US engagement with China was too thin in comparison to the stronger measures of deterrence, both in terms of American military investment, economic partnerships and attempts to propagate liberal institutionalism in its bilateral and multilateral relations in the Asia-Pacific. Inadvertently, Obama’s Asia policy brought an end to the feasibility of Sino-American engagement aimed at integrating China within a US-led international order. China became a competitor rather than partner to the US, as it sought to further its own interests by creating institutions and partnerships through which it could carry influence independent of the US and American visions of the Asia-Pacific region’s framework, and by pursuing increasingly assertive policies in the South and East China Seas. Whether Obama’s foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific could be interpreted as a “pivot”, or even a reorientation, is doubtful; the military redeployment envisioned never fully took place due to American overextension, and most importantly, presidential successor Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw the US from the TPP rendered void the Obama administration’s most significant and transformational Asia-Pacific policy. The ambitious rhetorical promises of American regional investment contributed to alienating China from the role envisioned of it by the US and end the long history of Sino-American engagement. As the “pivot” collapsed in its practical application, due to a combination of Chinese resistance as well as excessively

²⁸⁹ Victor Cha, 2016, ‘The Unfinished Legacy of Obama’s Pivot to Asia’. *Foreign Policy*, 6 September. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/06/the-unfinished-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/> (Accessed: 14 January 2020).

idealistic American aspirations which were undermined by both economic constraints and the difficulty of sustaining a foreign policy of global commitments in the 21st century, the relationship between the United States and China was worse off than before it began.

Chapter 4 – The Trump Administration: From Engagement to Confrontation

4.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to examine why Trump pursued a more confrontational foreign policy towards China, foregoing the engagement strategy of the past, and whether this was justifiable in light of China's recent actions and developments under Xi Jinping. The relevant issues concerning Trump's foreign policy direction towards China and the Asia-Pacific region so far include Trump's rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was the most important component of Obama's foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific; the tariffs introduced by Trump on Chinese exports, which triggered economic competition in the form of a trade war; Trump's attempt to halt the development of Huawei's 5G network for allegedly being a means of Chinese cyberaggression; Chinese assertion of its sovereignty over peripheral territories, which sparked uproar in Hong Kong prompting Trump to sign legislation in support of protestors; and most recently, the American and Chinese response to COVID-19, which aptly illustrated the growing adversity between the two great powers. Through discussing these issues, the thesis intends to evaluate the consistency of Trump's policies towards China and determine whether competition with China is a coherent and viable new American foreign policy direction towards China supplanting engagement or not.

4.2 The Rejection of the TPP and Transition to Unilateralism

The Withdrawal From the TPP

On 24 January 2017, shortly after assuming presidency, Trump withdrew the US from the yet to be ratified TPP.²⁹⁰ Stephen Walt interpreted this as part of an assault on the institutional order that had been the cornerstone of past US foreign policy: he argued that from Trump's perspective, enhancing a 'rules-based international order' by aiming to expand the scope of membership of 'multilateral institutions in which the United States played a central role' was the entirely wrong approach, based on an interpretation of the institutional order 'as "bad deals" that limited Washington's freedom of action, undermined U.S. sovereignty, and

²⁹⁰ BBC News, 'Trump executive order pulls out of TPP trade deal'.

crippled the U.S. economy'.²⁹¹ When Obama found limited success in tackling the problems created by China's unruly approach to the institutional order through bilateralism and existing institutions in the early years of his administration, he turned to increased multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific in order to bring about an institutional framework conducive to increased American influence, which would challenge China's ability to unduly benefit from its statist economic model and ideally force the PRC to liberalize its society to the extent necessary to be applicable for TPP membership. Trump, on the other hand, brought a more unilateral approach – subject to bilateral negotiations – to the forefront of foreign policy, prioritizing American interests as a nation rather than as international institutional figurehead: in a memorandum for the US trade representative concerning withdrawal from the partnership, Trump wrote that 'it is the intention of my Administration to deal directly with individual countries on a one-on-one (or bilateral) basis in negotiating future trade deals', his goal being 'to promote American industry, protect American workers, and raise American wages'.²⁹² From this, it can be argued that Trump differed more with Obama on the means than on the goals of trade negotiations in Asia, as the former President also sought to promote increased American exports to Asia, but through promoting globalization and multilateralism through the TPP.

But the TPP proposal was intended to serve multiple purposes to the Obama administration, one of them being the instatement of a counterweight to China's efforts to consolidate regional influence. Once the TPP as a powerful measure of deterrence was being abandoned by the US, China perceived a vacuum and an opportunity to reach the upper hand. According to Stephen Walt, 'when President-elect Donald Trump announced that he would abandon the TPP as soon as he took office, Beijing immediately offered to organize regional trade under the auspices of a "Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership" that excluded the United States'.²⁹³ Thus, the RCEP, which was proposed back in 2012, was shaping up to be a potentially successful counterpart to the TPP, the future of which faced uncertainty in the wake of Trump's actions. Since the RCEP encompassed all ASEAN members, Obama's attempts to sway Southeast Asia away from Chinese influence through deepened ties with ASEAN were undermined by no American-led equivalent being pursued following Trump's

²⁹¹ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 235.

²⁹² Donald J. Trump, 2017, 'Presidential Memorandum Regarding Withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Negotiations and Agreement'. *The White House*, 23 January. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-memorandum-regarding-withdrawal-united-states-trans-pacific-partnership-negotiations-agreement/> (Accessed: 18 April 2020).

²⁹³ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 35.

decision. Complicating matters, India was one of the external economies involved in the Chinese-led trade deal, which raises the question of whether American attempts to balance China by way of deepening ties with India were becoming inconsequential in the face of emerging economic partnership in an institution comprising the two strong Asian economies. Both Bush and Obama managed to improve relations with India, which boasted a growing economy valued at \$2.652 trillion GDP in 2017.²⁹⁴ The onus was thus on Trump to make the transition from multilateralism to unilateralism pay off, and to this end the relationship with India was becoming one of the most consequential US trade relationships. Beyond inviting China to pursue a dominant role in regional trade and alienating the US from its Asia-Pacific allies, the departure from TPP was also ill-conceived as economic policy, in that abandoning the partnership meant abandoning ‘more open access to a large and growing market’.²⁹⁵ This was because the partnership did not succumb in the absence of the United States: in April of 2017, Japan announced its intentions to continue to negotiate the TPP and adapt the trade deal to suit the remaining members.²⁹⁶ According to Robbie Gramer, beyond envisioned economic gains, ‘Japan might see in a revived TPP a way to limit China’s ability to dominate economic relations with its neighbors’, thus continuing a course akin to the Obama administration’s economic deterrence of China, but in a weaker form without the important backing of the US.²⁹⁷

Trump’s Unilateral Approach

Trump’s remarks leading up to his Presidency suggested he would instate a tough approach towards the Sino-American relationship on the topic of trade and depart from Obama’s foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific. Campaigning in Pennsylvania, he told supporters that ‘[t]he Trans-Pacific Partnership ... would be the death blow for American manufacturing’; on the topic of China, he claimed that ‘China’s entrance into the World Trade Organization has enabled the greatest job theft in the history of our country’, taking aim at previous Secretary of State Clinton for allegedly enabling Chinese IP theft and trade manipulation, and allowing the trade deficit with China to expand.²⁹⁸ At a rally in August 2016, he told attendants of his

²⁹⁴ World Bank Group, 2019, *India: GDP (current US\$)*. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/india> (Accessed: 18 April 2020).

²⁹⁵ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 248.

²⁹⁶ Robbie Gramer, 2017, ‘Japan Wants to Revive the Trans Pacific Partnership Even Without the U.S.’. *Foreign Policy*, 24 April. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/24/japan-wants-to-revive-trans-pacific-partnership-even-without-united-states-asia-trade-agreements/> (Accessed: 28 February 2020).

²⁹⁷ Gramer, ‘Japan Wants to Revive the Trans Pacific Partnership’.

²⁹⁸ Donald J. Trump, 2016, ‘Read Donald Trump’s Speech on Trade’. Transcript. *TIME*, 28 June. Available at: <https://time.com/4386335/donald-trump-trade-speech-transcript/> (Accessed: 23 April 2020).

intentions ‘to label China a currency manipulator’ once in charge, accusing the PRC of devaluing Chinese yuan ‘in order to take unfair advantage of the United States and all of its companies who can’t compete’.²⁹⁹ In the same speech, Trump suggested he would address this unfair conduct by way of ‘tariffs and taxes to stop the cheating’, as well as filing complaints to the WTO.³⁰⁰ This approach to China comprised one aspect of Trump’s more protectionist economic policy in general: Trump’s 2017 inaugural address, in which he declared that ‘[f]rom this moment on, it’s going to be America First’, suggested a departure from the Hamiltonian tradition as Trump specifically targeted ‘other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs’ in his speech and declared that ‘[p]rotection will lead to great prosperity and strength’.³⁰¹

Once in office, the question was whether Trump would temper his harshest campaign promises vis-à-vis China and attempt to gradually improve trade relations with Xi’s China through bilateral discussion, or if he would pursue the confrontational line outlined in his campaign from the onset. A statement from the White House Press Secretary following an April 2017 meeting between Trump and Xi Jinping at Mar-a-Lago highlights ‘challenges caused by Chinese government intervention in its economy’ and ‘the impact of China’s industrial, agricultural, technology, and cyber policies on United States jobs and exports’ as issues Trump managed to raise on the agenda of the early talks between the great powers.³⁰² At the briefing following the summit, a somewhat surprisingly conciliatory tone guided Trump’s attitude towards China, with him optimistically stating his conviction that ‘lots of very potentially bad problems will be going away’.³⁰³ During his Presidential campaign, Trump had made clear that he viewed China as ‘a currency manipulator’ and would formally attribute this moniker to the PRC once incumbent, but following Xi’s visit he reversed this decision, shifting the blame on the US dollar for being excessively strong rather than on China for manipulating its currency for a competitive trade advantage; in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, he argued that ‘China hasn’t been manipulating its currency for

²⁹⁹ Donald J. Trump, 2016, ‘Donald Trump threatens to put tariffs on Chinese products – video’. *The Guardian* video, 1:18. 24 August. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2016/aug/24/trump-tariffs-china-economy-video> (Accessed: 23 April 2020).

³⁰⁰ Trump, ‘Donald Trump threatens to put tariffs on Chinese products’.

³⁰¹ Donald J. Trump, 2017, ‘The Inaugural Address’. Transcript. *The White House*, 20 January. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/> (Accessed: 23 April 2020).

³⁰² The White House, 2017, *Statement from the Press Secretary on the United States-China Visit*. 7 April. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-united-states-china-visit/> (Accessed: 20 April 2020).

³⁰³ Donald J. Trump, 2017, ‘Remarks by President Trump After Meeting with President Xi of China’. Transcript. *The White House*, 7 April. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-meeting-president-xi-china/> (Accessed: 20 April 2020).

months’, and that designating it a currency manipulator would be detrimental to cooperation with China on the issue of North Korea.³⁰⁴

This shows that Trump’s unilateralism did not preclude bilateral discussion: despite his strong campaign rhetoric against China, it is possible that Trump initially believed he could negotiate with Xi Jinping to curtail some aspects of its statist approach to the economy and make Sino-American trade relations more conducive to American interests, without the need for strong confrontation. To this end, in May of 2017, a preliminary bilateral trade deal was arrived at between the US and China, which – if carried out to completion – would ‘expand access for a range of U.S. financial services and biotech products and ... reduce regulation on U.S. exports of liquefied natural gas to China’ and increase exports of American beef to the PRC; but the deal also notably included ‘[t]he United States’ recognition of the importance of China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative’.³⁰⁵ Seeing as the BRI and its complementary AIIB were components of a Chinese alternative to Obama’s envisioned Asia-Pacific institutional framework, and the TPP as a measure to balance China’s regional investment was abandoned by Trump, the recognition had great symbolic effect concerning the question of who would predominantly influence the future of the Asia-Pacific region; as Joshua Meltzer puts it, Xi Jinping presented Trump with ‘some market access in order to obtain a far more valuable economic and foreign policy concession’.³⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the deal was to be suspended in limbo shortly thereafter upon the commencement of the Sino-American trade war.

A Shift in Tone

Though Trump had toned down his accusations, and the US and China were making minor progress through dialogue, as 2017 progressed it became apparent that the Trump administration had not abandoned its plans to strongly confront China. According to a 2018 report by the RAND Corporation, the CCP’s 19th Party Congress held in October 2017 pointed to Chinese ambition to increase its involvement with international institutions, hoping to further develop ‘China’s network of partner countries’ in order ‘to step up the country’s

³⁰⁴ Gerard Baker, Carol E. Lee and Michael C. Bender, 2017, ‘Trump Says Dollar ‘Getting Too Strong,’ Won’t Label China a Currency Manipulator’. *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 April. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-dollar-getting-too-strong-wont-label-china-currency-manipulator-1492024312> (Accessed: 20 April 2020).

³⁰⁵ Joshua P. Meltzer, 2017, ‘The U.S.-China trade agreement – a huge deal for China’. *Brookings*, 15 May. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/05/15/the-u-s-china-trade-agreement-a-huge-deal-for-china/> (Accessed: 20 April 2020).

³⁰⁶ Meltzer, ‘The U.S.-China trade agreement’.

global leadership role'.³⁰⁷ It was also a display of how Xi Jinping was expediting the practice and promotion of China's brand of state capitalism: as Elizabeth Economy puts it, '[n]ot since Mao Zedong had a Chinese leader so directly suggested that others should emulate his country's model'.³⁰⁸ While the US under Trump was sowing doubt on US commitment to lead in the international order, Economy argues that Xi was stepping up to the job: '[f]or the first time, China is an illiberal state seeking leadership in a liberal world order'.³⁰⁹ But the Trump administration did not intend to stand idly by and let China redefine the rules of international institutions, especially not where trade relations were concerned. Coinciding with the 19th Party Congress, an address from the Trump administration's first Secretary of State – Rex Tillerson – reiterated the notion that China had been “irresponsible” in its dealings with the international system:

China, while rising alongside India, has done so less responsibly, at times undermining the international rules-based order ... China's provocative actions in the South China Sea directly challenge the international law and norms that the United States and India both stand for. The United States seeks constructive relations with China, but we will not shrink from China's challenges to the rules-based order and where China subverts the sovereignty of neighboring countries and disadvantages the U.S. and our friends.³¹⁰

What exactly were these perceived challenges to the rules-based order, and disadvantages to the US, that were attributable to China's rise? China's assertiveness in the South China Sea might reasonably be interpreted as a challenge to the order: in 2016, a ruling from the UNCLOS dismissed China's claims to the nine-dash line, but China disregarded the ruling and used 'threats of military force' to stifle the Philippines' and Vietnam's attempts to extract resources from the disputed areas of the sea throughout 2017.³¹¹ Bill Hayton, Associate Fellow at Chatham House, likens this to 'deploying military might to overturn the legal rights given to the other countries', arguing that if China's neighbouring states capitulate in the face of assertiveness, the legitimacy of the institutions of which international order is comprised of

³⁰⁷ Mazarr, Heath and Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, 39.

³⁰⁸ Elizabeth C. Economy, 2018, 'China's New Revolution: The Reign of Xi Jinping'. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(3): 60-74. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-04-17/chinas-new-revolution> (Accessed: 23 April 2020).

³⁰⁹ Economy, 'China's New Revolution', 61.

³¹⁰ Rex Tillerson, 2017, 'Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson'. Transcript. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 18 October. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson> (Accessed: 20 April 2020).

³¹¹ Bill Hayton, 2018, 'Two Years On, South China Sea Ruling Remains a Battleground for the Rules-Based Order'. *Chatham House*, 11 July. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/two-years-south-china-sea-ruling-remains-battleground-rules-based-order> (Accessed: 20 April 2020).

collapses, and order becomes expendable to power.³¹² With these recent developments in mind, Tillerson's charge gains merit, and the Trump administration did indeed continue (and expand upon) Obama's measures to deter Chinese military assertiveness through US regional military presence. The South China Morning Post reported in 2020 of an escalating trend of 'freedom of navigation patrols' conducted by the US navy in the South China Sea, in response to China's assertiveness and the enhancement of its military presence in the waters; began in earnest in 2015 during Obama's tenure, the amount of patrols had doubled from the preceding years' three patrols in 2017, and it was to further increase to nine annual exercises in 2019.³¹³

The combination of military deterrence and Trump's surprisingly conciliatory relationship with China could indicate that not much has changed between administrations. But this was not the case: despite Trump's apparent optimism in his early meetings with Xi Jinping about resolving the economic grievances that China's state capitalist-aided trade practices had entailed, there was no genuine engagement. Trump was beginning to make economic considerations the cornerstone of Sino-American relations, with an intention to challenge Chinese practices rather than promote China's institutional integration and have its wrongdoings be dissolved by virtue of its "responsibilities" to the institutional order. As the 19th Party Congress made apparent, China was not intending to adhere to existing norms valuing free-market capitalism, but rather to become an influential international actor and reshape the institutional framework to better suit their interests, supported by the influence afforded to it by its economic rise. This became apparent once Obama's attempts to ensure that China did not consolidate its influence in the Asia-Pacific and diverge from free-market capitalism, exemplified in the TPP, instead prompted China to pursue an alternative course through the RCEP, AIIB and BRI. Seeing as how China was seeking to diverge from the free-market capitalism that the US had made intrinsic to the international order it created, Trump's intention to challenge Chinese state capitalism head-on becomes more far-reaching than improving trade conditions for the US economy in order to benefit American citizens, whether intentional or not.

Trump's first National Security Strategy (NSS), published in December 2017, declared an explicit and decisive departure from the strategy of Sino-American engagement. The document framed China as a threat to American influence abroad, and interpreted Chinese

³¹² Hayton, 'South China Sea Ruling Remains a Battleground for the Rules-Based Order'.

³¹³ John Power, 2020, 'US freedom of navigation patrols in South China Sea hit record high in 2019'. *South China Morning Post*, 5 February. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3048967/us-freedom-navigation-patrols-south-china-sea-hit-record-high> (Accessed: 20 April 2020).

intentions as overwhelmingly concerned with seizing power and influence: ‘China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor’.³¹⁴ The document went so far as to interpret China’s actions within the lens of ‘a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order ... in the Indo-Pacific region’.³¹⁵ The 2017 NSS articulated the failings of Sino-American engagement, and how the strategy had failed to discourage the regime to pursue its own interests:

For decades, U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China’s rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China. Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others.³¹⁶

The document also emphasised generally the notion that US foreign policy would have to address ‘growing political, economic, and military competitions’ worldwide; by using language that evokes the Cold War era, competition with China was interpreted as an instance of the many ‘contests between those who value human dignity and freedom and those who oppress individuals and enforce uniformity’.³¹⁷ This outlook is reminiscent of Mearsheimer’s realist interpretation of how the world is moving away from unipolarity towards multipolarity, and that Sino-American competition will be a defining feature of contemporary world politics, suggesting a potential influence from realist IR theory on the new direction of US foreign policy. On the other hand, American realism – as an idea of what should constitute the motives and ambitions of US foreign policy – traditionally emphasised using restraint on the application of power abroad. This principle was not unambiguously apparent in the section outlining the “America First” measures of US foreign policy for a competitive world; for example, a policy line of ‘peace through strength’ was proposed, involving strengthening the US military and continuing America’s broad overseas commitments by applying ‘all tools of national power to ensure that regions of the world are not dominated by one power’.³¹⁸ In so doing, Trump’s prescriptions for US foreign policy, at least as apparent in the NSS, did not amount to isolationism or even an emphasis on restraint; the most crucial break with past administrations, particularly on the issue of China, was the shift from engagement to competition. In this way, the Trump administration confronted and toned down the idealistic

³¹⁴ The White House, 2017, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. December. Washington, D.C., 25. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (Accessed: 24 April 2020).

³¹⁵ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 45.

³¹⁶ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 25.

³¹⁷ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 2-3.

³¹⁸ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 3-4.

tendencies of the US foreign policy of the unipolar era. Dwindling during Obama's tenure, engagement was declared deceased by the Trump administration:

These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades – policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.³¹⁹

The question raised by the end of engagement was subsequently how the US were to address China's rise moving forward without adhering to the pretense that the PRC would eventually seek to become like the US, and the Trump administration offered a preliminary answer in the form of "competition"; but adjusting to a new strategic direction of US foreign policy requires time, and thus it was unclear by the end of 2017 how competition would play out once translated into actual policy.

4.3 Trade War and Economic Competition

On 22 March 2018, the US Trade Representative (USTR) published a report presenting its findings of an investigation into potential Chinese IP theft and other trade malpractices that had been requested by Trump in August of 2017.³²⁰ The USTR discovered several counts of Chinese practices that they argued to be 'unreasonable or discriminatory and burden or restrict U.S. commerce', including 'joint venture (JV) requirements and foreign equity limitations' designed to necessitate 'technology transfer from U.S. companies' in order to do business within the Chinese market; a system of 'technology regulations' requiring American business to adhere to 'non-market based terms that favour Chinese recipients' in order 'to license technologies to Chinese entities'; the influence of the state on Chinese businesses' practice of strategic 'investment in, and acquisition of, U.S. companies and assets' in order to 'generate the transfer of technology to Chinese companies'; and IP theft of 'sensitive commercial information and trade secrets' from American businesses.³²¹ China's ability to pursue such actions derived from the success of its state capitalist economic model, since

³¹⁹ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 3.

³²⁰ Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2018, *Findings of the Investigation into China's Acts, Policies, and Practices Related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974*. 22 March. Available at: <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/Section%20301%20FINAL.PDF> (Accessed: 21 April 2020).

³²¹ Office of the United States Trade Representative. 2018. *Update Concerning China's Acts, Policies and Practices Related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation*. 20 November. Available at: <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/enforcement/301Investigations/301%20Report%20Update.pdf> (Accessed: 21 April 2020).

China's large extent of state ownership of commercial enterprises facilitated its manipulation of the practices and organization of Chinese businesses to gain a competitive advantage for the rising Chinese economy. Thus, Trump – like Obama – had correctly understood that China was not adhering to the norms of free-market capitalism in its relationship with the economic institutional order, despite the reforms the regime had instituted since the days of Deng Xiaoping. From the American perspective this could not help but produce a detrimental effect on Sino-American trade. This recognition had led Obama to emphasise deterrence more than his predecessors, and to pursue the free-trade TPP in order to promote a framework of regional institutional trade less conducive to the kind of state intervention China was prospering from.

On that same day, \$60 billion in tariffs on Chinese goods were announced by the Trump administration, prompting China to warn of imminent retaliation.³²² This came in the wake of substantial steel and aluminium tariffs announced earlier in the month, which affected both US allies like Canada in addition to China; James McBride points out how Trump could justify tariffs 'under a national security, rather than purely economic, rationale, based on a little-used 1962 trade law', affording him both the ability to bypass public review as well as 'total discretion over how and for how long to apply the tariffs'.³²³ Upon explaining his decision to single out China with tariffs, Trump highlighted both Chinese IP theft for economic gain and the trade deficit with China, which he decried for being 'out of control', stating that 'China [accounts for] more than half' of the total of American trade deficits.³²⁴ Whilst concerns with IP theft and malpractice courtesy of Chinese state capitalism were legitimate, Trump's denunciation of the trade deficit with China was misguided. According to Keith Johnson, forcibly improving one particular bilateral deficit through tariffs and increased exports only amounts to 'playing whack-a-mole', since 'the underlying problem will just crop up elsewhere'.³²⁵ If balancing trade deficits was the intended goal, Johnson's analysis finds Trump's policy counterproductive, since 'his use of tariffs on imports, all else being equal,

³²² BBC News, 2018, 'Trump announces tariffs on \$60bn in Chinese imports'. *BBC News*, 22 March. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-43494001> (Accessed: 25 April 2020).

³²³ James McBride, 2018, 'The Risks of U.S. Steel and Aluminum Tariffs'. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 March. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/risks-us-steel-and-aluminum-tariffs> (Accessed: 25 April 2020).

³²⁴ Donald J. Trump, 2018, 'Remarks by President Trump at Signing of a Presidential Memorandum Targeting China's Economic Aggression'. Transcript. *The White House*, 22 March. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-signing-presidential-memorandum-targeting-chinas-economic-aggression/> (Accessed: 25 April 2020).

³²⁵ Keith Johnson, 2020, 'What Trump Really Doesn't Get About Trade'. *Foreign Policy*, 24 February. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/24/trump-trade-war-china-europe-deficit/> (Accessed: 23 April 2020).

tends to push up the value of the U.S. dollar, making imports relatively cheaper and exports relatively more expensive'.³²⁶ Trump's initial tariffs set in motion a series of US tariffs and counter-tariffs from China which together constituted a trade war of escalating proportions, which was yet to be fully resolved as of this writing; Reuters' timeline of the trade war presently culminates on a 11 October 2019 decision to implement a 'Phase 1 deal that includes suspension of planned tariffs and a Chinese pledge to buy more farm goods, but few details' as the most substantial recent development.³²⁷

Without going into excessive detail on the many developments of the trade war, an interesting question to explore concerns what Trump intended to achieve through tariffs. Chad Bown and Douglas Irwin suggest that due to the comprehensiveness of charges attributed to China's economic system, '[t]he administration's goal seems to be nothing less than the immediate and complete transformation of the Chinese economy or bust ... the United States wants China to turn its state-dominated economic system into a market-based one overnight'.³²⁸ If this were the case, Trump's policy towards China was guided by similar goals to those of the engagement strategy, only doing away with the latter's discretion and composure; results were sought after in the short-term rather than patiently (and quite possibly in vain) anticipating the transformation of the PRC. But the transformation of China was not the outcome the Trump administration's tariffs were meant to bring about. A 21 March 2018 ruling from the WTO found that '[t]he United States did not fully comply with a 2014 ruling against its anti-subsidy tariffs on a range of Chinese products', which China used to argue that 'the United States was a "repeat abuser" of trade remedy measures'.³²⁹ Thus, accusations of not acting in accordance with international trade rules were reflected back and forth between the US and China, both sides utilizing the WTO as a tool to advance their respective national interests rather than as an intrinsically important, impartial rules-based institution to which all must defer. In fact, the WTO, an integral component of the rules-based order towards which US administrations had lamented that China was acting in discordance, was itself being undermined by the Trump administration's continuous obstruction of

³²⁶ Johnson, 'What Trump Really Doesn't Get About Trade'.

³²⁷ Heather Timmons, 2020, 'Timeline: Key dates in the U.S.-China trade war'. *Reuters*, 15 January. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-china-timeline/timeline-key-dates-in-the-u-s-china-trade-war-idUSKBN1ZE1AA> (Accessed: 25 April 2020).

³²⁸ Chad P. Bown and Douglas A. Irwin, 2019, 'Trump's Assault on the Global Trading System: And Why Decoupling From China Will Change Everything'. *Foreign Affairs*, 98(5): 133. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2019-08-12/trumps-assault-global-trading-system> (Accessed: 27 August 2019).

³²⁹ Miles, 'China partially wins WTO case over Obama-era U.S. tariffs'.

nominees to its Appellate Body ever since 2017.³³⁰ What this suggests is that the onus was no longer on having China adhere to the norms of international order for the sake of mutual benefit, but on revising America's economic arrangements – with multilateral institutions as well as bilaterally – to gain an advantage benefitting the US. The American objections to China's state capitalist practices arose not from concerns with unfairness or wrongdoing towards a rules-based order, but rather from concerns that the institutions themselves – through increased Chinese influence in proportion with its rising economic power and turn towards a comprehensive foreign policy under Xi Jinping – could become less conducive to US leadership and to free-market capitalism and eventually accommodate and legitimize China's practices. The Obama administration had shared these worries and more subtly attempted to counteract increased Chinese influence through a series of diplomatic, military and economic measures in the Asia-Pacific, but to limited effect. Trump, on the other hand, diminished the ambiguity of his predecessor in office by explicitly and more strongly placing American interests front and centre of his foreign policy towards China and the international order.

The intensity of measures with which to challenge China was a point where Trump differed from Obama. Bown and Irwin present another possible rationale behind Trump's tariffs, namely that Trump never intended for China to pursue political and economic reforms: rather than pursue 'a comprehensive deal', Trump was pursuing 'the tariffs themselves'.³³¹ To this end, an attempt to completely dismantle, rather than incrementally diminish, 'the supply chains that bound the United States and China together' through extensive tariffs could have been the course taken, in so doing effectively pursuing 'the economic decoupling of the United States and China'.³³² This interpretation presents the notion that Trump has attempted to enact a decisive departure from the foreign policy towards China of preceding administrations; not finding the liberalization of the PRC to be possible to achieve through the hitherto preferred balance of engagement and deterrence, a zero-sum approach where China is labelled perpetual competitor to the US rather than its eventual partner might have been materializing in the Trump administration. Whilst engagement broke down under Obama and deterrence thus dominated his foreign policy concerning China, his measures of deterrence were not aimed at creating a competitor, but rather at giving China no other option than to

³³⁰ Tom Miles, 2018, 'U.S. blocks WTO judge reappointment as dispute settlement crisis looms'. *Reuters*, 27 August. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-wto/u-s-blocks-wto-judge-reappointment-as-dispute-settlement-crisis-looms-idUSKCN1LC190> (Accessed: 25 April 2020).

³³¹ Bown and Irwin, 'Trump's Assault on the Global Trading System', 133.

³³² Bown and Irwin, 'Trump's Assault on the Global Trading System', 133-134.

soften its state capitalist practices and give the US reins over the rules and norms of international order, to avoid economic decline through being isolated from an American-led regional institutional framework in the Asia-Pacific.

A combination of American idealism and realism had been Obama's solution: globalization through China's institutional integration, whilst simultaneously neutralizing the Chinese attempt to challenge the norms and rules of the American-led international order. If unchallenged, China's practices could gradually embed in and transform international institutions and impede America from practicing the global leadership role which motivates the idealist strand of American foreign policy. Whilst facilitating interdependence was at the heart of Obama's strategy towards China, following Bown and Irwin's interpretation, Trump's NSS and his imposition of tariffs were indicative of a foreign policy aimed at dismantling interdependence: recognizing the futility of making China more like the US, the substitute for engagement became competition. If the motivating idea was to separate the American and Chinese economies, such a policy line essentially aims to counteract globalization and brings a formal end to the assumption of American unipolarity. But this interpretation ascribes intentions to Trump that do not accord with his unilateral policy line, indicated by his early talks with Xi Jinping, which was motivated more simply by the search for an economic advantage for America.

Consider instead the possibility that such a shift in the goals and motivations of US foreign policy was never intentional from Trump and that his main priority was indeed to improve America's conditions for trade with China, but that the impact of his administration's advice, the policies introduced, and China's response steered Sino-American relations in a progressively more competitive and irreconcilable direction. There is also the objection that lack of political knowledge and experience on the President's behalf, rather than elaborate strategy, could have caused him to pursue a disproportionately excessive approach if his intentions were to secure moderate concessions from China; that said, the President's lack of credentials would not have prevented members of his administration from attempting to influence his policy direction on China. Regardless of intentions, what matters is that the Sino-American trade war constituted a clear confrontation with China and a departure from engagement, just as the 2017 NSS had announced: the trade war brought concerns with China's state capitalism to the forefront, conceded that partnership through liberalization of the PRC was unreachable, and soured relations between the two great powers. What this confrontational line entailed for the military and diplomatic dimensions of US foreign policy vis-à-vis China and its region is therefore of interest, seeing as how Rex Tillerson (replaced as

Secretary of State by Mike Pompeo in March 2018) had already strongly condemned China's assertiveness in the South China Sea before the trade war had even commenced.

4.4 The Trump Administration's Conflicted Foreign Policy Towards China

Human Rights and Confrontation Beyond Trade

In a 4 October 2018 speech, Vice President Mike Pence continued the Trump administration's accusations of Chinese economic misconduct, accusing China of having applied 'an arsenal of policies inconsistent with free and fair trade' to gain a competitive advantage for its economy.³³³ Pence raised the charge that China was pursuing 'so-called "debt diplomacy" to expand its influence', pointing at 'hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure loans to governments from Asia to Africa to Europe and even Latin America' as a ploy to create debt which could be used to coerce recipients.³³⁴ The Taiwan issue also relates to this, with Pence condemning how China had 'convinced three Latin American nations to sever ties with Taipei and recognize Beijing'.³³⁵ As an example of Chinese strategic coercion, Kate Lyons of the Guardian offers the case of Palau, which supports an autonomous Taiwan: '[i]n November 2017, the Chinese government order tour operators to stop selling package tours to Palau', to cripple an economy which relied on Chinese tourists.³³⁶ This was in the wake of El Salvador, Burkina Faso and the Dominican Republic having already changed their stance away from recognizing Taiwan earlier in 2018.³³⁷ In his speech, Pence also decried the PRC's authoritarian domestic practices – including surveillance, the 'Social Credit Score' system, and persecution of religious minority groups – aimed 'toward control and oppression of its own people', accused China of 'malign influence and interference in American politics and policy', and claimed that its growing military investment and assertiveness was a sign that 'China wants nothing less than to push the United States of America from the Western Pacific and attempt to prevent us from coming to the aid of our allies'.³³⁸ This rhetoric served to

³³³ Mike Pence, 2018, 'Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy Toward China'. Transcript. *The White House*, 4 October. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/> (Accessed: 17 April 2020).

³³⁴ Pence, 'Remarks by Vice President Pence'.

³³⁵ Pence, 'Remarks by Vice President Pence'.

³³⁶ Kate Lyons, 2018, "'Palau against China!': the tiny island standing up to a giant'. *The Guardian*, 8 September. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/sep/08/palau-against-china-the-tiny-island-defying-the-worlds-biggest-country> (Accessed: 29 April 2020).

³³⁷ Lyons, 'Palau against China!'.

³³⁸ Pence, 'Remarks by Vice President Pence'.

frame and reinforce the notion of China as a competitor, by highlighting its military aggression, its attempts to expand its influence, and its domestic authoritarianism. Whilst these issues had been exacerbated by Xi Jinping, they were by no means new and had not been ignored by the Obama administration; but setting them on the agenda worked to justify the new confrontational line in Sino-American relations set in motion by the tariffs.

According to polling from the US-based Pew Research Center as of spring 2019, a substantial figure of ‘60 % of Americans have an unfavourable opinion of China’, which was a 13 % increase from the preceding year’s survey.³³⁹ This shift in public opinion might be partly attributable to the Trump administration’s negative framing of China.

As accusations of Chinese wrongdoing grew broader, encompassing challenges beyond trade with the US and the world, it is pertinent to explore whether the Trump administration’s hostile rhetoric was translated into policies beyond trade issues. Some such policies involved confronting China’s authoritarian practices and centring on human rights issues: on 8 October 2019, Michael Pompeo issued a press statement announcing ‘Visa restrictions on Chinese government and Communist Party officials who are believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, the detention or abuse of Uighurs, Kazakhs, or other members of Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang, China’.³⁴⁰ In the statement, Pompeo also demanded that China ‘immediately end its campaign of repression in Xinjiang’ and ‘release all those arbitrarily detained’.³⁴¹ This was in response to China having ‘detained more than a million Muslims in reeducation camps’, measures which ‘started in 2014 and ... drastically expanded in 2017’, according to Lindsay Maizland.³⁴² The purpose of the camps as indicated by the CCP was to address ‘extremist and separatist ideas’ challenging national cohesion, and officials alleged detainees were ‘voluntarily admitted’ to what amounted to ‘boarding schools’; despite this, the majority of detainees had ‘never been charged with crimes and have no legal avenues to challenge their detentions’, and the volition of participation was a deceit.³⁴³ Maizland links this issue with the BRI, stating that ‘Xinjiang is an important link’ in

³³⁹ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, 2019, ‘U.S. Views of China Turn Sharply Negative Amid Trade Tensions’. *Pew Research Center*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/08/13/u-s-views-of-china-turn-sharply-negative-amid-trade-tensions/> (Accessed: 8 January 2020).

³⁴⁰ Michael R. Pompeo, 2019, ‘U.S. Department of State Imposes Visa Restrictions on Chinese Officials for Repression in Xinjiang’. Press statement. *U.S. Department of State*, 8 October. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-department-of-state-imposes-visa-restrictions-on-chinese-officials-for-repression-in-xinjiang/> (Accessed: 20 March 2020).

³⁴¹ Pompeo, ‘U.S. Department of State Imposes Visa Restrictions’.

³⁴² Lindsay Maizland, 2019, ‘China’s Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang’. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 25 November. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-repression-uighurs-xinjiang> (Accessed: 30 April 2020).

³⁴³ Maizland, ‘China’s Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang’.

the infrastructure project; to this end, detainment of minority groups served to ‘eradicate any possibility of separatist activity’, but more insidiously China has allegedly used the prisoners as a work force ‘in factories close to the detention camps’.³⁴⁴

Robert Kaplan argues that Muslim minorities ‘represent a strategic issue’ from China’s perspective, since ‘for centuries western China was the weakest and most unstable part of China’s internal empire’: China’s measures – rightfully perceived as transgression of human rights – were intended to stabilize this volatile internal region, so that the PRC was poised ‘to concentrate on sea power’.³⁴⁵ Because of this, Kaplan points out that outright denunciation and one-sided demands from the point of view of human rights, as exemplified by Pompeo’s press statement, is ineffective if the desired outcome was to mitigate the PRC’s human rights violations.³⁴⁶ This is because of the disconnect between China’s strategic motives and the American moral critique of human rights violations, coupled with the tension of ‘an on-again, off-again trade war’, creating an impasse; as Kaplan puts it, China perceives the opposition to its actions in Xinjiang ‘as just another American assault on China’s legitimacy’.³⁴⁷

Thus, the policy direction that the Trump administration’s Visa restrictions exemplifies diminished prospects for reconciliation between the US and its competitor. The US engagement policy had led past administrations to choose a soft response to incidents like Tiananmen Square under the assumption that such events would not reoccur given time for China to open up, but this strategy did not end up abating China’s authoritarianism; the Trump administration presented an alternative, a confrontational posture to China’s human rights transgressions, but this too – if Kaplan’s argument is to be believed – was inefficient and possibly even counterproductive. As another example, the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, signed on 27 November 2019 in the wake of escalating protests in Hong Kong, allowed the US to ‘sanction Hong Kong government for not maintaining its autonomy from mainland China’, according to the South China Morning Post.³⁴⁸ The Guardian reported that Trump’s bill was met with backlash from China, its ministry of foreign affairs calling it

³⁴⁴ Maizland, ‘China’s Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang’.

³⁴⁵ Robert D. Kaplan, 2020, ‘Why the U.S.-China Cold War Will Be Different’. *The National Interest*, 19 January. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-us-china-cold-war-will-be-different-114986> (Accessed: 19 March 2020).

³⁴⁶ Kaplan, ‘Why the U.S.-China Cold War Will Be Different’.

³⁴⁷ Kaplan, ‘Why the U.S.-China Cold War Will Be Different’.

³⁴⁸ Robert Delaney and Owen Churchill, 2019, ‘Donald Trump signs Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act into law, brushing off China’s warnings’. *South China Morning Post*, 28 November. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3039673/donald-trump-signs-hong-kong-human-rights-and-democracy-act> (Accessed: 30 April 2020).

‘pure interference in China’s internal affairs’ and ‘full of prejudice and arrogance’.³⁴⁹ The stick and carrot approach of engagement and deterrence had not been sufficient in alleviating Chinese human rights violations, but removing one component of this policy line was no solution if the US wanted concessions from China.

On the issue of human rights, the Trump administration seemed to continue the foreign policy direction of its predecessors, a foreign policy which in the context of the end of engagement seems less concerned with convincing China to end its violations and instate liberal reforms than on denouncing the regime and solidifying a notion that it was incompatible with American interests and values. To this end, the policy served a purpose: signalling to the world that China was incompatible with the rules and norms of the liberal international order, in the hope that international actors would sever ties with the PRC and align with the American position. The problem with this approach was how Trump’s other policies, notably his obstruction of the WTO Appellate Body, might have hindered such a strategy: his own challenges to international order risked undermining the credibility of the message that it was China who was not acting in accordance with international institutions. Adding to the confusion was how Trump spoke warmly of Xi Jinping in social media, as for example when he tweeted on 15 August 2019 that he had ‘ZERO doubt that if President Xi wants to quickly and humanely solve the Hong Kong problem, he can do it’, describing Xi as ‘a great leader who very much has the respect of his people’.³⁵⁰ Not only did Trump’s rhetoric muddle America’s actual stance on foreign policy issues, such as how seriously the US condemned China’s human rights transgressions, it also raises the question of how consistent the administration’s rhetoric and policy was. Furthermore, Stephen Walt argues that there was a disconnect between Trump and his administration: ‘once Trump’s more extreme foreign policy appointees had flamed out and been replaced, the people around him worked overtime to tame his worst instincts’.³⁵¹

With this in mind, the coherence of Sino-American competition starts to disintegrate, and several questions rise to the forefront: was competition with China primarily reserved for the economic dimension, or did it extend to military and diplomatic issues as well? If so, did this competition differ from the deterrence of past administrations? Using ASEAN as an

³⁴⁹ Lily Kuo, 2019, ‘‘Full of arrogance’’: Trump angers China by signing bills backing Hong Kong protesters’. *The Guardian*, 28 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/27/trump-hong-kong-bills-signed-china-protest> (Accessed: 30 April 2020).

³⁵⁰ Donald J. Trump, 2019, Twitter post. 15 August, 12:59 A.M. Available at: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1161774305895694336> (Accessed: 3 May 2020).

³⁵¹ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 241-242.

example, Obama attempted to deepen ties with the organization and counteract Chinese regional influence. However, Southeast Asian countries' dependence on China made this a complicated prospect, and according to David Shambaugh, 'since 2016-17, it has become evident that most are gravitating much closer to Beijing'.³⁵² One would suspect that Trump's "America First" policy would render obsolete Obama's efforts to foster cooperation within Southeast Asia, but Shambaugh finds to the contrary that '[e]ven under President Trump, after a slow start, the United States is continuing to strengthen its ties with states and societies in Southeast Asia'.³⁵³ Thus, there was arguably a substantial level of continuity between administrations on foreign policy towards China outside of the economic dimension. The broad scope of US involvement in Asia has not been lost, even though the Obama administration's Asia-Pacific "pivot" has not been realized. A problem was the ambiguity, arising in part from Trump's rhetoric, on whether the Trump administration's ambitions and intentions were consistent within the administration, and essentially if Trump knew what he was doing: Walt argues that 'Trump's compulsive, boastful, insulting, juvenile, and frequently inaccurate tweets ... reinforced concerns about his judgment and lent credence to continuing concerns about his fitness for office'.³⁵⁴ In this way, Trump's rhetoric and personal stance does matter for US foreign policy, both through how the US is perceived abroad and how the administration's policies can be affected by the potential disparity between Trump and his administration: Stephen Walt argues that the outcome is a situation where 'U.S. influence and status is declining, but its global burdens are not'.³⁵⁵

These caveats notwithstanding, whilst the Trump administration did continue several elements of Obama's foreign policy towards China, there were marked differences. Obama's Asia policy had a substantial component of deterrence, and measures such as increased military investment and diplomatic efforts in Southeast Asia were thus compatible with Trump's confrontational line: but Trump's withdrawal from the TPP, his emphasis on unilateralism and bilateral negotiations, and direct confrontation of China's state capitalism through tariffs were indicative of a different approach. It is within economic policy that a departure from the foreign policy of past administrations becomes most apparent, with the Trump administration finally transitioning away from engagement and confronting China over its economic practices. The different economic approach might eventually open the door

³⁵² David Shambaugh, 2018, 'U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence?' *International Security*, 42(4): 87. doi: 10.1162/isec_a_00314.

³⁵³ Shambaugh, 'U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia', 98.

³⁵⁴ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 245.

³⁵⁵ Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 254.

for a reinterpretation of the other dimensions of America's strategic approach to a rising China, and in so doing more broadly break with the idealist consensus in Washington, which under Trump still remained an integral part of US foreign policy. This possibility is apparent in how Trump's confrontational posture towards China opened an opportunity to improve relations with India, as Ashley Tellis points out:

The Trump administration's focus on great-power competition, its designation of China as a strategic competitor, and its pursuit of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" all gave India renewed importance. So did the U.S. president's desire to sell more American goods abroad. Since taking office, Trump has authorized the release of several advanced U.S. weapons systems, including Predator drones and the Aegis integrated air and missile defense system—both of which India would have struggled to procure from a U.S. administration more fearful of provoking Pakistan or irritating China.³⁵⁶

The Trump administration thus continued a strategic partnership that both Bush and Obama had worked towards improving, with the intention of India playing a part in deterring increased Chinese regional influence in Asia; but Trump's direct confrontation of China might have enabled faster progress on the alliance than Obama's largely multilateral approach. Since the US withdrew from the TPP, India's connections to China's institutional alternative of the RCEP was of great concern: a concern which was relieved when Prime Minister Narendra Modi withdrew India from the RCEP in early November 2019, which he explained 'would be ruinous for his country's poor'.³⁵⁷ Despite these developments seemingly aligning American and Indian interests in opposition to China, there is a risk that the economic focus of Trump's foreign policy might ultimately undermine the US-India relationship: Greg Ip argues that Indian protectionism could eventually render it a target for Trump's tariffs.³⁵⁸ However, this tension notwithstanding, concerns with counteracting China's rise could quite possibly win out over Trump's inclinations towards improving American trade relations, as Ashley Tellis points out how Trump 'has been surprisingly

³⁵⁶ Ashley J. Tellis, 2020, 'The Surprising Success of the U.S.-Indian Partnership: Trump and Modi Have Deepened Defense Cooperation Against the Odds'. *Foreign Affairs*, 20 February. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2020-02-20/surprising-success-us-indian-partnership> (Accessed: 23 February 2020).

³⁵⁷ Bhavan Jaipragas, 2019, 'China's in, but, without India, is 'world's largest trade pact', the RCEP, still such a big deal?'. *South China Morning Post*, 9 November. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3036991/chinas-without-india-worlds-largest-trade-pact-rcep-still-such> (Accessed: 18 April 2020).

³⁵⁸ Greg Ip, 2020, 'The U.S.'s Next Trade War? As China Clash Cools, Conflict With India Looms'. *Wall Street Journal*, 19 February. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/indias-protectionist-path-risks-u-s-trade-clash-11582126205> (Accessed: 21 February 2020).

lenient when it comes to India's uncompetitive trade practices'.³⁵⁹ Somewhat paradoxically, the competing foreign policy directions within the Trump administration – of competition reflecting America's economic interests on the one hand and acting in continuity with past foreign policy on the other – renders both options plausible.

The Case of Huawei

Since the economic dimension is essential to exploring in which ways Trump departed from past foreign policy, the issue of the Sino-American trade war merits additional treatment. The case of Huawei exemplifies how the Trump administration attempted to rally US allies in opposition to Chinese state capitalism, which – if successful – would diminish future US administrations' prospects of restoring Sino-American engagement, and thus bring longevity to economic competition with China. In August 2018, the administration instituted a rule prohibiting American federal agencies from acquiring and incorporating the technology and products of Chinese telecommunications firms, the most prominent example being Huawei, 'out of fear the companies could divulge US trade secrets and other information to the Chinese government'.³⁶⁰ This ban, officially based on cybersecurity concerns, prompted Huawei to file a lawsuit against the US government in March 2019, arguing that the ban was unjustified and based on erroneous assumptions.³⁶¹ In May the policy line towards Huawei hardened, with the US Commerce Department announcing it was 'putting Huawei on its "entity list" of firms that need special permission to buy American components and technology', with the potential to damage Huawei by denying the business access to the 'microchips and other specialized parts' that it was purchasing from American firms.³⁶² This coincided with a May 15th executive order signed by Trump which urged US agencies to refer to several prohibitions on the acquisition and use of 'information and communications technology or services' that was connected to 'a foreign adversary'.³⁶³

³⁵⁹ Tellis, 'The Surprising Success of the U.S.-Indian Partnership'.

³⁶⁰ Jodi Xu Klein, 2019, 'US agencies banned from doing business with Huawei and other Chinese tech companies, as Trump administration cites security concerns'. *South China Morning Post*, 8 August. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3021888/trump-administration-bans-us-agencies-doing-business-huawei-and> (Accessed: 2 May 2020).

³⁶¹ Paul Mozur and Austin Ramzy, 2019, 'Huawei Sues U.S. Government Over What It Calls an Unfair Ban'. *The New York Times*, 6 March. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/06/business/huawei-united-states-trade-lawsuit.html> (Accessed: 2 May 2020).

³⁶² Raymond Zhong, 2019, 'Trump's Latest Move Takes Straight Shot at Huawei's Business'. *The New York Times*, 16 May. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/16/technology/huawei-ban-president-trump.html> (Accessed: 2 May 2020).

³⁶³ Donald J. Trump, 2019, 'Executive Order on Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain'. *The White House*, 15 May. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential->

Adam Segal argues that the campaign against Huawei was not solely a response to cybersecurity worries, but also ‘a gambit in a larger battle over the future of the digital world’: whether a Chinese-influenced framework of digital services will supplant American information and communication technology, with the possible consequences being that ‘the Internet will be less global and less open, and Beijing will secure the economic, diplomatic, national security, and intelligence benefits that once flowed to Washington’.³⁶⁴ Viewed within the lens of the trade war, the decisions to block Huawei from the American market seem to solidify Bown and Irwin’s argument that Trump’s policy of competition is in pursuit of economic decoupling with China; Segal shares this assumption, but finds that the policy ‘will likely strengthen Beijing’s hand’ in the long-term since the US does not offer customers outside the US sufficient reason to blacklist Huawei, or a comparable American option with which to satisfy the demand for 5G technology.³⁶⁵ This is reinforced by how Trump’s policy line created uncertainty concerning Huawei’s sustainability, due to its cut-off supply of required American technology and parts; this was an uncertainty which Segal views to be an intentional ‘attempt to work around foreign governments and go straight to the customers’, thus attempting to force an outcome in disregard of the intentions and outlook of other states.³⁶⁶ Washington’s actions did not translate the twofold national concerns of combating cybersecurity threats and leading the economic and technological competition with China into a strategy that other governments could subscribe to. But the attempt to counteract Huawei, and the trade war more broadly, was arguably not guided by an intention to decouple the American and Chinese economies completely. That it could be perceived as such was owing to failure to reconcile Trump’s unilateralism with the continuing deterrence of China.

The Trump administration did attempt to rally support internationally in opposition to Huawei, with Mike Pompeo traveling abroad to issue warnings of the security issues raised by the company and suggesting that countries deciding upon embedding Huawei technology within their infrastructure risked being alienated from receiving information from the US.³⁶⁷

actions/executive-order-securing-information-communications-technology-services-supply-chain/ (Accessed: 2 May 2020).

³⁶⁴ Adam Segal, 2019, ‘The Right Way to Deal With Huawei: The United States Needs to Compete With Chinese Firms, Not Just Ban Them’. *Foreign Affairs*, 11 July. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-07-11/right-way-deal-huawei> (Accessed: 2 May 2020).

³⁶⁵ Segal, ‘The Right Way to Deal With Huawei’.

³⁶⁶ Segal, ‘The Right Way to Deal With Huawei’.

³⁶⁷ Keegan Elmer, 2019, ‘Huawei or US: Mike Pompeo issues warning to allies that partner with Chinese firm’. *South China Morning Post*, 22 February. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2187275/huawei-or-us-mike-pompeo-issues-warning-allies-partner-chinese> (Accessed: 2 May 2020).

However, the Trump administration's message was not emphatically received abroad, as apparent from a January 2020 decision from the UK government that partial adoption of Huawei's 5G technology was acceptable, giving the company permission 'to build part of the UK's 5G network as long as it is restricted to "non-core" parts of infrastructure'.³⁶⁸ Visiting the UK in the wake of the decision, Pompeo indicated disapproval of the decision and an intention to continue debating the matter, remarking that 'the US would never permit its national security information to go across networks in which it did not have confidence'.³⁶⁹ Whether the UK eventually comes around to the American position remains to be seen; it is not entirely unlikely, as the January decision later triggered 'a backbench rebellion within the Conservative party'.³⁷⁰ Regardless, Uri Friedman argues that the UK decision created a ripple effect among many American allies, as '[t]he European Union and France swiftly disclosed similar plans'.³⁷¹ The situation puts into question how much sway America can have in solidifying hard lines of division between China and the West presently. Friedman claims further that '[m]any countries around the world are now caught between the United States as their main security ally and China as their top trading partner'.³⁷²

This reveals that exporting the American position of deterring China to the European continent meets the constraints of economic interdependence: for Europeans to jeopardize the global markets that the liberal international order has brought about and ensured for a long period is not a decision to be taken lightly. The effort requires that security concerns outweigh economic concerns in European allies' relations with China, which might not be true at present. Thus, Uri Friedman points out that in the case that the US intends to treat Sino-American competition as the emergence of a new Cold War, it might fail to consolidate its previous alliances, since 'international relations today are too intertwined, and Chinese power too magnetic, for them to enlist in a U.S.-led coalition and usher in a Cold War-style bifurcated world'.³⁷³ The campaign against Huawei was a clear indicator that the Trump

³⁶⁸ Rowena Mason and Dan Sabbagh, 2020, 'Johnson faces Tory rebellion after allowing Huawei 5G role'. *The Guardian*, 29 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/29/johnson-faces-tory-rebellion-over-huawei-5g-plans-for-britain> (Accessed: 2 May 2020).

³⁶⁹ Patrick Wintour, 2020, 'Mike Pompeo restates US opposition to Huawei access'. *The Guardian*, 30 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/30/mike-pompeo-restates-us-opposition-to-huawei-access> (Accessed: 2 May 2020).

³⁷⁰ Gordon Corera, 2020, 'Coronavirus: Huawei urges UK not to make 5G U-turn after pandemic'. *BBC News*, 13 April. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52189281> (Accessed: 7 May 2020).

³⁷¹ Uri Friedman, 2020, 'America Is Alone in Its Cold War With China'. *The Atlantic*, 17 February. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/02/us-china-allies-competition/606637/> (Accessed: 19 March 2020).

³⁷² Friedman, 'America Is Alone'.

³⁷³ Friedman, 'America Is Alone'.

administration was serious in its attempts to confront China's state capitalism directly, but it was transparent from the policies introduced that American unilateral interests and not merely cybersecurity concerns guided Washington's opposition to the telecommunications firm. This meant that the policy line held limited allure abroad, thus resulting in failure so far in alienating China through having it cut off from trade with the rest of the world.

The Phase One Deal and Trump's Conflicted Foreign Policy

On 15 January 2020, a phase one trade deal was signed, which brought 'a pause on trade tensions' that had defined the Sino-American relationship since 2018; but the deal left substantial American tariffs in place 'on \$360 billion worth of Chinese imports' and was not comprehensive.³⁷⁴ As Matthew Goodman et al. argue, the agreement 'leaves many structural issues – notably Chinese subsidies and other industrial policies - unaddressed'.³⁷⁵ The aspects of Chinese state capitalism that the deal managed to encompass included IP theft and technology transfer, as for instance article 1.2 which instated the following obligation:

The Parties shall ensure fair, adequate, and effective protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights. Each Party shall ensure fair and equitable market access to persons of the other Party that rely upon intellectual property protection.³⁷⁶

This was bolstered by measures to hold China accountable, including a stipulation 'that China publish an action plan that details how and when China will implement its IP obligations', as well as providing the US with 'regularly published data on IP enforcement'.³⁷⁷ Trump's unilateralism had brought at least a temporary ceasefire to the trade war and partial concessions from China, but Huang and Smith point out that the long-term repercussions of the trade war could impair the efficacy of multilateral economic institutions, in that 'unilateral tariffs and sanctions supersede established global norms and principles' in Trump's foreign policy.³⁷⁸ Whether Trump's trade war was successful in alleviating Chinese wrongdoing remained to be seen, as the phase one deal instated provisions that affected aspects of China's

³⁷⁴ Matthew P. Goodman et al., 2020, 'What's Inside the U.S.-China Phase One Deal?'. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 15 January. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whats-inside-us-china-phase-one-deal> (Accessed: 25 April 2020).

³⁷⁵ Goodman et al., 'What's Inside the U.S.-China Phase One Deal?'

³⁷⁶ Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2020, *Economic and Trade Agreement Between the Government of the United States and the Government of the People's Republic of China*. Available at: https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/agreements/phase%20one%20agreement/Economic_And_Trade_Agreement_Between_The_United_States_And_China_Text.pdf (Accessed: 23 January 2020).

³⁷⁷ Goodman et al., 'What's Inside the U.S.-China Phase One Deal?'

³⁷⁸ Yukon Huang and Jeremy Smith, 2020, 'Trump's Phase One Deal With China Misunderstands Global Trade'. *Foreign Policy*, 28 January. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/28/trump-phase-one-deal-china-misunderstand-global-trade-leave-worse-off/> (Accessed: 4 May 2020).

state capitalism, but not the economic model as a whole. Still, Trump heralded the deal as a great success, calling it ‘a momentous step ... toward a future of fair and reciprocal trade’, praising the efforts of Xi Jinping who he stated was ‘a very, very good friend of mine’.³⁷⁹

These sentiments might be genuine. Arguably, it was not the comprehensive decoupling of the American and Chinese economies that Trump was in pursuit of, but rather moderate concessions – secured through unilateralism complemented with bilateral negotiations – that benefitted American commerce. However, the backdrop within which he was attempting to do this was a complex situation where a rising China’s ‘form of capitalism is invariably coming into conflict with the liberal meritocratic capitalism of the West’, as Branko Milanovic puts it.³⁸⁰ China was attempting, through strategic measures including infrastructure projects and institutions conducive to export of its economic model, military assertiveness in its region and increased foreign policy ambitions, to expand its standing and accommodate a global leadership role for China, as the 19th Party Congress indicated.³⁸¹ But Trump was not concerned with counteracting this outcome, but rather to address the symptoms of the deeper issue, by renegotiating the practices he deemed to be unfair that were derived from China’s state capitalist model. In the event of a second phase of the trade deal, it is likely that challenging such issues as state subsidies of Chinese firms will produce a gridlock. This is because China’s economic practices reflect its broader strategic interests, not purely economic interests of gaining an unfair advantage vis-à-vis the US, as Trump seems to perceive it. The broader strategic context of Sino-American relations was not lost on the rest of his administration, which arguably attempted to steer the US away from reconciliation with China and towards something more reminiscent of a Cold War. These efforts have met with limited success, apparently because the objective does not reflect what the President wishes to achieve through US foreign policy. As an example, despite the phase one deal having been instated, Pompeo warned African states of state capitalism during a tour in February 2020, urging ‘its leaders to shun Chinese investments and, instead, look to Washington and American companies for collaboration’.³⁸² But as noted by Abdi Latif Dahir, Pompeo could not present an alternative to the Chinese infrastructure projects that were spreading through

³⁷⁹ Donald J. Trump, 2020, ‘Remarks by President Trump at Signing of the U.S.-China Phase One Trade Agreement’. Transcript. *The White House*, 15 January. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-signing-u-s-china-phase-one-trade-agreement-2/> (Accessed: 4 May 2020).

³⁸⁰ Milanovic, ‘The Clash of Capitalisms’, 18.

³⁸¹ Milanovic, ‘The Clash of Capitalisms’, 18.

³⁸² Abdi Latif Dahir, 2020, ‘On Tour, Pompeo Courts Africa, to Counter China’. *The New York Times*, 18 February. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/world/africa/pompeo-africa.html> (Accessed: 21 April 2020).

the continent: there have been no ‘major new American government investment, initiatives or assistance’.³⁸³ The competing impulses within the Trump administration thus caused it to conduct a conflicted foreign policy towards China: an uneasy combination of bilateral trade renegotiations and deterrence through military and diplomatic means.

4.5 Conclusions

Trump’s foreign policy towards China focused on unilateralism and bilateral negotiations in pursuit of improving the trade relationship with China in a way conducive to the American economy, but his method of doing so was through extensive tariffs which made it unclear what the US intends to achieve. This was courtesy of a disconnect between Trump’s economic policies and his administration’s attempts to continue deterring China in a manner similar to the Obama administration, two approaches which were based on different intentions and sought to achieve different goals. Because of Trump’s withdrawal from the TPP, it was no longer a means to counter China’s growing regional influence, illustrating how the incoherence between intentions within the administration worked to counteract the efficacy of deterring China. The intensity of Trump’s economic policy direction might have suggested to other states – China included – that the administration wanted a Cold War-esque divergence between China and the US, and a decoupling of their respective economies; the attempt to recruit European allies in opposition to China’s trade practices, as exemplified by the case of Huawei, also reinforced this notion. The trade war was coupled with a confrontation on the issues of human rights and military assertiveness in the South China Sea, an NSS which declared China a competitor, and allegations of discriminatory trade behavior: all this exacerbated the divergence between the US and China that was already becoming apparent through Obama’s time in office.

Though Trump was correct in identifying Chinese state capitalism as a challenge to the American economy, the lack of cohesion between intentions and policies and the pull between competing interests within the administration rendered unclear what the US actually wanted to achieve in its competition with China. In some respects, the Trump administration continued the Obama administration’s policy direction on deterring China, but elsewhere – crucially in economic competition and the emphasis on unilateralism – Trump’s policy direction differed significantly and suggested a departure from American idealism in that it

³⁸³ Dahir, ‘On Tour, Pompeo Courts Africa, to Counter China’.

conveyed a focus on national interests rather than advancing American global leadership. Perhaps unintentionally, Trump's policies – unable to coherently bridge economic competition and strategic deterrence into a unified, comprehensive foreign policy direction – constituted a confrontation with China which brought Sino-American relations to a low point. This was evident from the tone between the great powers once COVID-19 disease, originating in China, grew into a pandemic in Spring 2020: AP News reported of 'harsh accusations and bitter name-calling over responsibility for the spread of the novel coronavirus'.³⁸⁴ Trump did not want to produce an adversary in China, but this was unfortunately where Sino-American relations were headed.

³⁸⁴ Matthew Lee, 2020, 'Coronavirus rocks already strained ties between US and China'. *Associated Press News*, 18 March. Available at: <https://apnews.com/211f49062091f5f9c80980910c32d6cb> (Accessed: 20 March 2020).

Conclusions – The End of Engagement and the Uncertain Future of the Sino-American Relationship

This thesis explored the various ways in which the US, through its foreign policy, has responded to the economic rise of China. The purpose of this was to examine whether the past policy direction towards China had been changed during the Obama and Trump administrations, if there was a shift in either or both of the motives and contents of US foreign policy. A strategy of engagement with China – welcoming its integration within the liberal international order and deepening the Sino-American relationship – guided US foreign policy since the 1970s, in the hopes that China would thus acquiesce with and not challenge or depart from the prevailing system of international order, ideally seeking to reform and open itself up to accommodate its role in the existing order. The strategy looked promising as the Cold War with the Soviet Union ended, starting a unipolar moment where the US and the ideology of liberalism looked set to dominate the direction of international relations into the future. It seemed that engagement was the best fit to a period of economic globalization that aligned American interests with the institutions of the liberal international order it had been integral to bringing about in the postwar years against Communism, institutions which were now expanding in scale. The economic interdependence that globalization brought about meant that previously Communist states' adoption of free-market approaches to the economy seemed integral to their survival and prospering. Engagement seemed to be a success as Deng Xiaoping appeared to open up China and embrace the market, beginning the integration into the institutional order which facilitated its WTO membership in 2001.

But as the 21st century progressed, it became apparent that integration did not moderate China's ambition to exert geopolitical influence in the East Asia region. Furthermore, though China has incorporated elements of free-market capitalism within its economy, its economic model of state capitalism was resilient enough to offer a counterpart to American free-market capitalism. The government was able to exert substantial influence on Chinese firms without succumbing to economic decline, thus enabling China to resist becoming like the US and instead use its institutional integration to its own national benefits. In consequence, China has invested in improving its military capabilities and put them to use in the South China Sea, with ambitions of expanding China's regional influence and promoting its model of state capitalism around the world, whilst participating in the international institutional order. The US strategy of engagement was on occasion

accompanied by deterrence, such as a partnership with India under the Bush Jr. administration, in order to restrict China's ability to increase its regional influence; but the mild measures of deterrence did not suffice to dissuade China from pursuing its own course. When Obama took office, the risk of China creating and leading a separate sphere of influence in Asia was taken seriously, leading to limited engagement with China and deterrence rising to the forefront. Obama intended to increase the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific and engage with regional actors in order to pull them away from China's orbit, focusing on multilateralism through the TPP so that the future institutional framework of the region would be conducive to American interests.

This was still guided by the assumption that globalization would eventually force China to abandon ambitions of regional leadership: the TPP, Obama's primary measure of deterring China, still assumed that China would eventually have no choice but to accommodate economic globalization, and that American global leadership was sustainable into the future. The challenge was the possibility that an increasingly powerful China, with a distinct economic model that fused its authoritarianism with free-market capitalism, could exert the influence available to it through being the world's second largest economy into transforming its region into conforming with its interests, and from this position possibly attempt to renegotiate the norms and rules of international order. The TPP was actively counteracted by China's own agenda of institutions and projects, such as the RCEP, AIIB, and BRI. Whilst China escalated its measures to increase its regional influence, Obama's Asia-Pacific policy faltered under the weight of America's excessive commitments abroad, unable to enact the kind of investment in the region that was presented in the idea of an Asia-Pacific "pivot". And once Trump became President and immediately withdrew from the TPP, the cornerstone of Obama's deterrence of China unravelled, and Sino-American relations had grown more tense without producing results.

Trump's approach to China shifted the focus from multilateralism to unilateralism aided by bilateral negotiations, pertaining to pursue a foreign policy of "America First". To this end, he took aim at renegotiating China's trade practices to improve the situation of American businesses and workers. The 2017 NSS put a formal end to engagement with China, which had dwindled under the Obama administration, and instated "competition" as an alternative policy direction. Whilst purely economic competition did not necessitate hostile relations with China in other areas such as military and diplomatic policy, the extensiveness of tariffs introduced by Trump made it unclear what the administration actually wanted from the PRC, and this was coupled with a campaign to recruit allies in Europe and Africa against

China's state capitalism and the condemnation of China's human rights abuses and military assertiveness. Since state capitalism was integrally connected with China's strategic objectives of increasing its regional influence, the PRC could not acquiesce with all of Trump's demands, leading to an escalating trade war which suggested to observers that decoupling of the US and Chinese economies could be Washington's end goal. Engagement was meant to transform China to open up its society and embrace the norms and rules of existing international institutions, but as pointed out by Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, 'Washington risks making a similar mistake today, by assuming that competition can succeed in transforming China where engagement failed – this time forcing capitulation or even collapse'.³⁸⁵ The intentions of competition were unclear, deriving from the disconnect between Trump's bilateral economic policy line of trade renegotiation with China and the various diplomatic and military measures of his administration which framed China as an adversary and not solely as an economic competitor.

Thus, it was uncertain whether the Trump administration wished to pursue the same ends that the engagement strategy did, only transforming China through confrontation rather than engagement; to decouple from China, persuade other nation-states to join America in opposition to China, and in so doing bring about a world reminiscent of the Cold War; or if US foreign policy had shed its idealism, putting "America First" to reach relatively modest concessions on unfair Chinese trade practices on a bilateral basis, with no intentions of forcefully engendering the broader transformation of China. In reality, aspects of all these concerns found expression in the policies of the Trump administration, leading to competition reflecting an inconsistent combination of interests. This reveals that the Trump administration had not found a consistent and clear replacement with which to guide US foreign policy towards China now that engagement seemed no longer a viable strategy. Whilst the US was struggling to come to terms with what it wanted from the Sino-American relationship and practiced an ambivalent policy which jeopardized trust among its allies in American global leadership and undermined the United States' relationship with the international order, as exemplified by the obstruction of Appellate Body nominees to the WTO, China sought to step in and assume a greater role in leading the international order.

As the unipolar moment heads towards its end, America has been reluctant to acknowledge that its capacity for unilateral global leadership is dwindling and that China's interests and ambitions as a nation-state are not going to be absorbed by a liberal institutional

³⁸⁵ Campbell and Sullivan, 'Competition Without Catastrophe', 97.

order. The United States' attempts to counteract China's challenge to the international order were not derived from fear that order will dissolve if China's influence increased, but from fear that the order would evolve to no longer predominantly accommodate America's interests. As counteracting this outcome through engagement no longer seems to be a feasible possibility, a long overdue redefinition of the purposes of US foreign policy is in order, one which the Trump administration has not managed to come to terms with so far. China seems to be headed towards consolidating a sphere of influence in Asia, necessitating that future US administrations increasingly draw from the realist tradition of American foreign policy. The extensive idealism of the unipolar moment is no longer sustainable, as US priorities being spread across the globe counteracted Obama's plans for ensuring American global leadership into the future. The institutional integration of China has ensured that the deteriorating Sino-American relationship does not constitute a new Cold War: as the case of Huawei indicates, rallying Europe and Africa in opposition to China encounters the challenge of interdependence, since globalization – which the US has hitherto embraced – ensured that global trade is conducted within a shared institutional framework. Additionally, as Mearsheimer argued, Sino-American competition will face a multipolar rather than bipolar world, meaning Europe will have little incentive to join America in opposition to China unless the US can provide an adequate reason beyond serving America's own interests. The conflicted foreign policy of the Trump administration did not suffice in this regard.

The uncertainty engendered by Trump's policies has led to debate on whether the US and China is involved in a Cold War. Hunter Marston rejects the analogy by claiming that the contemporary situation in US-China relations 'is far more tranquil than that of the Cold War', with competition primarily happening 'along economic and technological axes' rather than through displays of military might, unlike the Cold War where 'proxy war' was waged on multiple occasions between the US and the Soviet Union.³⁸⁶ Robert D. Kaplan argues emphatically that a new Cold War is underway, and that it 'will be about dividing the globe into different political, trade, consumer, and technological domains', as economic globalization evolves from a stage characterized by unity into a stage where the world economy is segmented into blocs.³⁸⁷ Odd A. Westad argues that despite crucial differences in

³⁸⁶ Hunter Marston, 2019, 'The U.S.-China Cold War Is a Myth'. *Foreign Policy*, 6 September 2019. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/06/the-u-s-china-cold-war-is-a-myth/> (Accessed: 9 September 2019).

³⁸⁷ Robert D. Kaplan, 2020, 'Why the U.S.-China Cold War Will Be Different'. *The National Interest*, 19 January. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-us-china-cold-war-will-be-different-114986> (Accessed: 19 March 2020).

areas such as the rival nations' ideological motivations and degree of economic interdependence, the Cold War analogy is not completely baseless as 'the United States and its allies again face a communist rival that views the United States as an adversary and is seeking regional dominance and global influence'.³⁸⁸ His suggestion for future policy is 'to preserve and build deep relationships with Asian countries' and aim for conciliation in Sino-American relations through diplomacy.³⁸⁹

Though opinions diverge on the severity of the situation in Sino-American relations, some issues stand out as important for ensuring that the conflict does not grow too dire. These are to improve relations with China through diplomatic communication, to reach for common ground with US allies in Europe and elsewhere, and to focus on the areas of economy and technology since they constitute the key aspects of today's Sino-American relationship. At this point competition exists, and whether or not to interpret it as a Cold War is not the essential issue; even those perspectives who view the conflict as such concede that the situation today is radically different. What the US needs is to identify the purposes and goals of its foreign policy, informed by the restrictions beyond its control: realism is central to such an endeavour, since the goals of the US do not necessarily correspond to the goals of the rest of the world. The turn towards Sino-American competition and the world's response reveals the shortcomings of the idealist consensus, a realization which is beginning to surface in the American foreign policy discourse. Should American foreign policy insist upon preserving primacy through competition towards China, a different assumption must guide the effort: American interests do not equal universal interests.

To conclude, the COVID-19 pandemic might prove to be the event that forces realism to the forefront of US foreign policy and solidifies that China's increased international influence is going to be a fact of life for future administrations. Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi compare the US response to the pandemic with Anthony Eden's mishandling of the Suez crisis, which 'marked the end of the United Kingdom's reign as a global power'.³⁹⁰ Michael T. Klare predicts 'an accelerated retreat from globalization (and its concomitant, American global leadership), along with the hastened emergence of semi-autonomous

³⁸⁸ Odd A. Westad, 2019, 'The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?'. *Foreign Affairs*, 98(5): 87, 91, 93. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-08-12/sources-chinese-conduct> (Accessed: 27 August 2019).

³⁸⁹ Westad, 'The Sources of Chinese Conduct', 94.

³⁹⁰ Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, 2020, 'The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order'. *Foreign Affairs*, 18 March. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-03-18/coronavirus-could-reshape-global-order> (Accessed: 31 March 2020).

regional blocs'.³⁹¹ Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman argue that '[w]hereas the Trump administration has used the pandemic to pull back on global integration, China is using the crisis to showcase its willingness to lead'.³⁹² Just how transformative the pandemic will be for world politics remains to be seen as of this writing. What can be ascertained is that the US is at a turning point, a choice between accepting that China will be an influential actor in the future, and work towards sustainable competition; or retaining aspirations for American primacy. The latter requires not only that the US proves to the world that China should not decide the rules and norms of international order, but to convince the world of why America should.

³⁹¹ Michael T. Klare, 2020, 'From Globalization to Regionalization?'. *The Nation*, 22 March. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/economy/globalization-regionalization-covid/> (Accessed: 25 March 2020).

³⁹² Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, 2020, 'Will the Coronavirus End Globalization as We Know It?'. *Foreign Affairs*, 16 March. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-03-16/will-coronavirus-end-globalization-we-know-it> (Accessed: 27 March 2020).

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