

## **America's International Leadership in Transition: From Global Hegemony towards Offshore Leadership\***

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*This article aims to help make sense of the change which America's international leadership has undergone by performing two tasks. One is offering a focused (as opposed to comprehensive) assessment on US international leadership of the post-Cold War period. The appraisal reveals that Washington's strong will to lead is a mixed blessing for both itself and others: while contributing crucially to global public goods provision, US leadership occasionally exacerbates certain international problems as it overreaches itself (particularly in inland areas such as Iraq and Ukraine). The other task is analyzing an emerging strategy that Washington has been formulating in its effort to adjust to the transforming strategic environment brought forth partly by its excessive will to lead. The key point here is that America is developing an offshore leadership strategy: it aims to remain the most influential (albeit not sole) leader by establishing its sphere of influence firmly over maritime and coastal regions (while trying to avoid inland interventions).*

**Keywords:** *The United States, International Leadership, Security Strategy, Transition, Unipolarity*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The United States has led international politics, whether alone or together with other countries, since its entry into World War II. Beneath this consistent surface, however, the underlying character of American leadership has gone through some epochal transitions in both its geographical scope and in the principal means utilized to manage the international order. The early 21<sup>st</sup> century has been witnessing one such transition. This article aims to help make sense of the change by performing two tasks. One is offering a focused (as opposed to comprehensive) assessment on US international leadership of the post-Cold War period. The appraisal reveals that Washington's strong will to lead is a mixed blessing for both itself and others: while contributing crucially to global public goods provision, US leadership occasionally exacerbates certain international problems as it overreaches itself (particularly in inland areas such as Iraq and Ukraine). The other task is analyzing an emerging strategy that Washington has been formulating in its effort to adjust to the transforming strategic environment brought forth partly by its excessive will to lead. The key point here is that America is developing an offshore leadership strategy: it aims to remain the most influential (albeit not sole) leader by establishing its sphere of influence firmly over maritime and coastal regions (while trying to avoid inland interventions).

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## 2. ASSESSMENT OF US INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP

### 2.1. Consequences of US Leadership: Benefits and Side Effects

There is no question that the United States is *the* leader in international affairs. Underpinning this long-standing reality is the way America's strong will to leadership—Washington's determination to play decisive roles in shaping and running the world order—combines with its preponderant power. The latest *National Security Strategy* unveiled in 2015 presents “a vision for strengthening and sustaining American leadership,” and proclaims that “the question is not *whether* America will lead, but *how* we will lead into the future” (The White House, 2015). The document's predecessor published in 2006 similarly stated: “We choose leadership over isolationism... We seek to shape the world, not merely be shaped by it... History has shown that only when we do our part will others do theirs. America must continue to lead” (The White House, 2006). Thus, there exists a bipartisan consensus on US global leadership, despite all the partisan brawls in Washington. This consensus remains powerful—albeit less so with Donald Trump (who has been lukewarm about global leadership) in the Oval Office. The will to leadership still pervades federal legislatures, bureaucracies, think tanks, academia, media, and public opinion (Friedman and Logan, 2016).

This strong willingness is a valuable asset for international society as a whole, since American leadership contributes crucially to producing public goods essential for maintaining political and economic stability throughout the world (Drezner, 2013; Mastanduno, 2002). For notable examples, the United States patrols seas and oceans of the world to ensure freedom of navigation, and props up various international institutions to uphold order and facilitate cooperation among nations. The United States certainly benefits from paramount international influence originating from its leadership roles, but it shoulders a considerable burden as well.

However, America's will to leadership can turn into a liability at times, when the resolve becomes excessive. The United States posing as “the indispensable nation” has sometimes tried to establish or exercise leadership over areas and issues that it is ill-equipped to manage effectively.<sup>1</sup>

Some of its attempts to extend international leadership produced an unintended consequence of igniting or exacerbating costly armed clashes among or within other states. A US-led overexpansion of NATO into Russia's immediate vicinities has produced two such episodes. Washington's effort to bring Georgia into NATO (over which it practically presides) and Georgia's emboldened challenge to Russian interests led to Moscow's violent reaction and Tbilisi's humiliating defeat in 2008 (Preble, 2009). The year 2014 witnessed a similar episode playing out over Ukraine. Partly responding to the looming prospect of Ukraine joining the EU and later NATO, Russia forcibly annexed the strategically important Crimea and fueled a civil war in eastern Ukraine. Although controversy continues over whether Washington had actual designs to incorporate Ukraine into its orbit, it is difficult

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<sup>1</sup> In 1998, then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated: “we [Americans] are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future” (US Department of State, 1998). In February 2015, the Obama administration pronounced that “American leadership in this century, like the last, remains indispensable” (The White House, 2015: 29).

to deny that Washington took certain measures that gave such an impression to Moscow and a sizable group of Ukrainians.<sup>2</sup> Strikingly feeble responses by the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations against these Russian aggressions clearly revealed how little power the United States could bring to bear upon Russia over the former Soviet republics. Even for a superpower, mobilizing and projecting military power (especially land power) to distant inland areas is a tough challenge, as the United States painfully experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan (Mearsheimer, 2001). Trouble multiplies when those remote areas are adjacent to a local great power determined to resist the offshore superpower—a predicament that Washington faced in Vietnam, which neighbors China.<sup>3</sup> Nor does a maritime power like the United States have vital interests in the inland parts of other continents. In light of this strategic reality, the US attempts to bring Georgia and Ukraine into the fold constituted an overextension—a risky adventure beyond the country's means.

The United States also committed similar blunders in the Middle East, entering into successive conflicts of choice.<sup>4</sup> The “unnecessary war” in Iraq is arguably the most notable instance of Washington's zeal for strengthening its international leadership gone awry. After expending enormous blood and treasure in an eight-year war, the United States has yet to establish control over affairs in Iraq. Worse, its influence is probably on the decline, as the hostile Islamic State goes on a rampage, undermining Iraq's government and socio-economic stability for which the United States paid dearly for so long. US armed interventions in Libya and Syria (not out of necessity but by choice) likewise produced negative outcomes overall, albeit to a lesser extent. Instead of accepting America's leadership, these countries slipped into uncontrollable chaos, turning into a breeding ground for its most vicious enemies and churning out a flood of refugees. All these developments have curtailed US influence over those countries and the other bystanders that came to question Washington's judgment and benevolence (Walt, 2005; Pape, 2005). Thus, America's obsession with leadership often leads to cases of destabilizing overreach in certain regions.

These overextensions then drain US power and preoccupy its attention, thereby threatening to cause an “underbalancing” in some more important region—presently Asia (Kennedy, 1987; Schweller, 2006). US allies and partners in Asia—arguably becoming *the* global center of political and economic gravity—have expressed doubts (albeit exaggerated at times) about the viability of US “rebalancing” currently hamstrung by unfinished ventures in Eastern Europe and the Middle East (Tow, 2015).

Another notable side effect of US overextension is Russia's strategic alignment with China. The hyperactive Washington unwittingly has played matchmaker for Moscow and Beijing, driving the distrustful historical rivals into an unusual marriage of convenience targeting Washington. When no common enemy exists, Russia and China tend to tighten their guard against each other, since both are contiguous continental states with menacing land

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<sup>2</sup> Supporting political opponents of the Yanukovich government was one such measure. See Mearsheimer (2014). The United States later publicly vowed to “support partners such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine so they can better work alongside the United States and NATO.” See The White House (2015: 25).

<sup>3</sup> The balance of resolve typically favors the local great power defending its nearby security interests over the offshore superpower extending or preserving its leadership.

<sup>4</sup> War in Afghanistan was not a conflict of choice. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and possible sequels all but necessitated an armed retaliation against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, although the United States had a range of options concerning how to wage that war.

power. During the last century, they joined hands twice in their struggles against Imperial Japan and the United States, but only briefly. As the threats eased off, the Sino-Russian partnerships quickly unraveled. The Japanese-Soviet neutrality pact of 1941 curtailed the Sino-Russian strategic cooperation, and the Sino-Soviet alliance (1950-1961) ceased to function long before the Sino-American rapprochement of 1972 (Christensen, 2011). As a general rule, a balancing coalition among continental powers against a maritime state like the United States is quite unnatural, since the latter's naval power poses little lethal danger to the former—especially to an inland power like Russia (Levy and Thompson, 2010). Rather, continental states typically balance each other, because their respective armies are most threatening. This propensity is particularly salient when the continental neighbors are going through a major power shift and are deeply nationalistic, as is the case with Russia and China.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the current Sino-Russian alignment can be viewed as an extraordinary development made possible by misguided US encroachments on Russian security interests. This development has reduced US leverage over not only Russia, but also China—probably a country of the greatest importance to the United States at present and deep into this century.

America's voluntary assumption of leading roles also may have unintentionally hindered the solution of major international problems. The North Korean nuclear development may be a case in point. Since Pyongyang's nuclear program became an international issue in the late 1980s, Washington has willingly taken up the principal responsibility of resolving the matter. It was the United States that single-handedly negotiated and signed the 1994 Framework Agreement with North Korea in Geneva. When the arrangement failed to surmount mutual distrust and collapsed a decade later, Washington began to play a leading role again in the search for a replacement, although other members of the Six-Party Talks played significant supporting roles as well. Its multilateral appearance notwithstanding, the joint statement of September 19, 2005 essentially had two primary contracting parties—North Korea and the United States; so did two follow-up plans for implementation concluded on February 13 and October 3, 2007.

Unfortunately, these Washington-led initiatives have failed, by inadvertently setting the process of North Korean denuclearization on a particularly difficult path.<sup>6</sup> All these agreements required close cooperation between two adversaries with a long history of acute conflict and deep mistrust. Among all participants of the Six-Party Talks, the United States overall had the most inimical relationship with North Korea. (Over the period when the participants negotiated and concluded those multilateral agreements, inter-Korean relations were not so confrontational, as Seoul pursued a policy of unconditional engagement and accordingly tolerated Pyongyang's unilateral actions.) Therefore, it was especially difficult for Pyongyang to trust Washington's promises on economic assistance and security guarantee; Washington for its own part found Pyongyang's commitments to denuclearization untrustworthy. Such mutual distrust eventually wrecked the series of agreements designed to stop Pyongyang's nuclear development. The distrustful Pyongyang pursued a secret Plan B (uranium enrichment) to hedge against possible US perfidy. The equally doubting Washington

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<sup>5</sup> Russia, as well as the United States, is on the decline relative to China, and therefore has good reasons to worry about the latter's future behavior. See Copeland (2000), Gilpin (1981), Lee (2008), and Van Evera (2001).

<sup>6</sup> The argument does not justify blaming America alone for the lack of progress with denuclearization. Pyongyang's duplicity and strong desire for nuclear weapons are probably the most important among multiple causes for the failure.

put on hold, or brought to a halt, the implementation of the nuclear deals at the first sign of Pyongyang's apparent noncompliance.<sup>7</sup> Had some other country with lesser mistrust—such as China in its capacity as North Korea's ally—taken charge of striking and implementing a deal with North Korea, the denuclearization process might have had a better prospect for success, as was the case with South Korea. Seoul gave up nuclear development in the late 1970s in exchange for security guarantees and under economic pressures not from its communist adversaries, but from its American ally (Monteiro and Debs, 2014). This formula owed its success in part to the general tendency that sanctions and inducements offered by an ally are more effective than those by an adversary: allies tend to possess more credibility and leverage than do adversaries (Drezner, 1999).<sup>8</sup> Had Moscow or Beijing similarly taken the lead in persuading Seoul to denuclearize, success would have been far less likely because of the deep-seated mistrust between them.

These US-led nuclear deals proved to be not only ineffectual but also counterproductive. Their breakdowns further deepened the mutual distrust between Washington and Pyongyang, as each felt cheated by the other. Expressing this sense of betrayal, the then US Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates stated in 2009 "I'm tired of buying the same horse twice," as the Six-Party Talks slipped into indefinite suspension as the result of Pyongyang's second nuclear test and its international repercussions (Sanger, 2009). One of the former President Obama's chief strategists said in a similar vein: "Clinton bought it once, Bush bought it again, and we're not going to buy it a third time" (Sanger, 2009). Pyongyang for its own part has blamed Washington for turning the 2005 agreement into a "dead document" (KNS, 2009), and declined to resume denuclearization talks precisely on the grounds that previous such attempts had failed due to US hostile policy (Reuters, 2015b).<sup>9</sup> In the wake of each collapsed deal, the United States also resorted to economic pressures and/or military threats, with the hopes that North Korea would return to the bargaining table or even disarm itself unconditionally. However, these coercive measures rather heightened Pyongyang's sense of insecurity and thereby reinforced its aspiration for nuclear armament. For these reasons, diplomacy presently has an even lower chance of success than it did in 1994 or 2005. The recent Iranian nuclear deal has not imbued Pyongyang and Washington with any more eagerness to take proactive steps toward a third agreement of their own, despite their rhetorical avowals of being "open" to negotiations (Gale, 2015; Mullen, 2015; National Journal, 2013; Reuter, 2015a).

The United States once again has volunteered in leading an international effort to curb Iran's nuclear program. Although there are high hopes for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action signed in July 2015, it is reasonable to anticipate that its implementation will meet

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Bill Clinton administration in 1998 confronted Pyongyang over the latter's suspicious activities in Kumchang-ni, which an inspection later found unrelated to nuclear development. Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress also threatened to stop funding the US end of the deal. These moves originating from mistrust caused delays in implementing the Agreed Framework, and in turn amplified Pyongyang's doubts on US trustworthiness. See Lee (2006: 3).

<sup>8</sup> History attests that Washington often has failed to stop nuclear aspirants that fall outside its sphere of influence, due to its deficient leverage. See Miller (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Pyongyang also asserted in early 2003 that Washington had reduced the 1994 Agreed Framework to a "dead document" by "systematically violating" it. North Korea called itself "the victim" of US treachery. See KCNA (2003).

particularly tough challenges (not so different from those that derailed the North Korean nuclear deals of 1994 and 2005), since its primary contracting parties—Washington and Teheran—are two long-time adversaries. Their decades-old hostile relationship has produced deep-rooted mutual suspicion and entrenched domestic groups with vested interests in its continuance. For a notable example, it is hard to find a US presidential candidate who had not expressed mistrust on Iran on his/her campaign trail last year. Even Hillary Clinton—former President Obama’s secretary of state—proclaimed “[her] starting point will be one of distrust” in her speech on the Iran nuclear deal, not to mention her Republican competitors including Donald Trump (Indyk, 2015). The bad blood between the United States and Iran also reflects some genuine conflicts of interest (e.g., over Teheran’s support of certain terrorist organizations and rogue states), which threaten to stop the nuclear agreement from being successfully implemented.

## 2.2. Sources of America’s Will to Lead

While America’s will to leadership is clearly valuable, it occasionally turns into an obsession causing unnecessary conflicts and avoidable deadlocks, as described above. What then explains America’s sometimes excessive determination to lead? Global unipolarity with America as the sole superpower can help account for its strong will to leadership, although other factors such as foreign instigation and American exceptionalism probably matter, too.<sup>10</sup>

A unipole may develop a strong sense of responsibility, since its leadership is often crucial (albeit not necessary) for effectively providing essential global public goods to the international system. If the unipole does not take charge of supplying the goods, there are few (if any) other powerful countries that can do so with equivalent efficacy in its stead, and the goods might be undersupplied (Krasner, 1976; Mastanduno, 2002; Olson, 1965). Hence, evading international leadership could do harms to the United States as well as the international society as a whole, although catastrophe might not necessarily ensue as commonly anticipated (MacDonald and Parent, 2011). For example, if the United States stops playing a leading role in maritime security (ensuring free navigation of the seas), international transportation and commerce would suffer substantially (Drezner, 2013). Although there might eventually emerge an alternative regime allocating responsibilities more evenly across the concerned members of international society, this would take considerable time to take root and carry greater uncertainty, given that few countries possess navies capable of operating in an effective, sustained manner beyond their vicinity. Furthermore, such multilateral cooperation in the absence of leadership could suffer a serious collective action problem. Policing waterways of some regions such as Africa would face particularly daunting challenges, since no competent naval powers reside there. US leadership is also crucial to maintaining and running the global regime of nuclear non-proliferation: as the sole superpower, only the United States has genuine interests and capabilities for preventing the spread of nuclear weapons to every corner of the world. Lesser nuclear

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<sup>10</sup> A superpower here points to a state maintaining a great-power position in most—if not all—major regions of the world. A great power is a state preeminent in a given region. A superpower has a global reach in its power and interest, while an ordinary great power lacks it. Global unipolarity means that the world political system contains only one superpower, regardless of the number of great powers. Global unipolarity differs from a hegemonic system which contains no great powers, besides a superpower.

powers may take no active part in or even impede non-proliferation efforts in those regions in which they are uninterested or unable to intervene (Kroenig, 2010). Therefore, without a US leadership role, the NPT regime would lose much of its effectiveness. The United States does not assume such responsibilities out of pure altruism: the unipole only plays those “systemic management” roles that provide it with net benefits and has no substitute player with comparable capacity (Monteiro, 2014; Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, 2012).

A unipole facing feeble systemic constraints also can readily succumb to an unsound mixture of (undue) ambition, complacency, and pride.<sup>11</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the American unipole has frequently shown signs of all these traits. A superpower with no peer competitor threatening its survival tends to be ambitious, pursuing secondary interests (which it otherwise would give up on) and taking on inessential (albeit occasionally significant) tasks. The promotion of democracy worldwide through active interventions rather than by successful example is one such undertaking. Washington, directly or indirectly, has involved itself in regime changes in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine, and ended up fighting wars of choice (as opposed to wars of necessity) at times in those endeavors.<sup>12</sup> Another relevant phenomenon is America's hasty pursuit of absolute security—seeking to eradicate *all* sources of present and potential dangers at once, rather than reduce them to a manageable level and seek a long-term solution (Bacevich, 2008; Preble, 2009). Such a grand quest naturally entails simultaneous offensive employments of military power for preventive as well as retaliatory purposes. Invading (rather than containing) Iraq, while waging a war in Afghanistan, was the most clear-cut manifestation of such ambition.

The unipole also can be quite complacent, anticipating that its superior power would produce an easy success or a minor failure at worst. (The unipolar power's complacency has some reasonable basis: in the absence of peer competitors, few foreign policy debacles would put its survival at risk.) The Bush administration went to war against Iraq with a light heart, expecting to “shock and awe” its adversary without much trouble. The administration even anticipated that the demonstration of its military might in Iraq would likely induce Teheran and Pyongyang's obeisance with respect to their nuclear developments. This misjudgment led to Washington's abortive high-handed approach, which only accelerated their nuclear programs and resulted in the waste of a last opportunity to forestall Pyongyang's nuclear test.<sup>13</sup> These disappointing results notwithstanding, one still can hear in Washington loud political voices for increasing military pressures against Iran and North Korea, or redeploying combat troops in Iraq. This lingering complacency partly reflects the fact that the United States, a sole superpower ensconced far away from East Asia and the Middle East, has lost little in relative terms (although quite a bit in absolute terms). For instance, the debacle in Iraq cost only small fractions of US national wealth and population, and never seriously jeopardized its survival (Mearsheimer, 2014). Moreover, a nuclear-armed North Korea has not posed a mortal danger to the United States and its allies yet (Lee, 2007).

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<sup>11</sup> On feeble systemic constraints a unipole faces, see Brooks and Wohlforth (2008).

<sup>12</sup> While the Afghanistan war counts as a war of necessity, defeating al-Qaeda may not have required overthrowing the Taliban regime and establishing a democratic government in Kabul.

<sup>13</sup> It is not that the odds of stopping North Korean armament would have been good, without the hard-line approach. As argued above, the denuclearization process only had a slim chance of success from the beginning, due to deep mistrust between the chief negotiating partners—Washington and Pyongyang. President Bush's high-handed approach deepened mistrust and insecurity on the part of Kim Jong-il, and thereby virtually eliminated whatever chance the process had.

The unipole may also be proud, refusing to acknowledge its lack of ability to solve a particular problem or denying a need to put more suitable states in charge of handling it. Washington has insisted on playing a leading role in disarming Pyongyang, even though its ingrained image of Pyongyang as enemy makes it ill-equipped for this mission, as explained above. The United States also has attempted to hold sway over remote regions such as the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Caspian littoral states, despite its lacking enough capability and resolve to overrule determined resistance by local powers like Russia and Iran. At the apogee of US power, Washington even seems to have believed in its omnipotence: a senior Bush administration official said “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality” (Bacevich, 2008).

The unipole’s obsession with leadership is also partly due to other states’ instigation. Some states appeal to its sense of responsibility by emphasizing their predicament and incompetence. Others stoke the unipole’s ambition, complacency, and/or pride. All these acts of incitement aim at harnessing the unipole’s immense power for their own purposes and reducing their share of burden. The United States has had a long list of such shrewd allies and partners the world over, as befits its position of lone superpower. China keeps asserting that its leverage over North Korea is highly limited, although the latter’s economic lifeline lies in its hands, and Beijing is uniquely positioned (as a sole treaty ally) to buy off Pyongyang’s nuclear program with security guarantees as well as economic assistance. Beijing does no more than just hosting and mediating the nuclear talks.<sup>14</sup> China then demands, in unison with other members of the Six-Party Talks, that the United States (which possesses lesser leverage) show supreme leadership in stopping North Korean nuclear development. In Eastern Europe and its southern periphery, countries such as Ukraine and Georgia highlight threats from Russia and call for US intervention in those areas of secondary magnitude, while not trying their best to address Moscow’s legitimate concerns and thereby ward off conflicts. America’s Asian allies and partners vocally express their worries about its diminishing military budget and consequently weakening credibility, while spending only small fractions of their own wealth for self-defense. They practice “cheap riding” by taking advantage of the US fixation with the credibility of its commitments and the worth of its lesser allies (Posen, 2014).<sup>15</sup> As Table 1 demonstrates, none of the Asian allies spend a larger share of GDP on defense than does the United States. Japan—America’s richest ally—expends only 1 percent of GDP, and South Korea—the most exertive among all the allies—invests 2.4 percent, although both provide defense facilities and financial contributions to sustain US military presence, and purchase large amounts of US weaponry.<sup>16</sup> Australia, another US core ally, falls in between

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<sup>14</sup> This role of impartial violence-forbidding mediator may have produced two negative unintended consequences: (1) Pyongyang came to view its alliance with Beijing as unreliable and therefore increased its desire to acquire nuclear weapons; (2) Pyongyang may have expected Beijing to deter a US preventive attack. Thus, China unwittingly became “a powerful ally that is neither willing to offer reliable future protection guarantees nor able to issue consequential threats of immediate abandonment”—a necessary condition for a weak state’s nuclear armament according to Monteiro and Debs (2014: 10).

<sup>15</sup> NATO allies also engage in a similar behavior. Also see Preble (2009: 94-96).

<sup>16</sup> For more on Japan, see Posen (2014: 40-44). In response to the Chinese military buildup and US strategic restraint, Japan under the Abe cabinet has moved to expand its military contribution to its US alliance by making necessary legal arrangements. Despite some notable progress with this initiative, it remains uncertain how this would affect the Japanese defense budget. See Liff and



**Table 1.** US Allies' Defense Budgets and GDP (2014)

	GDP (billion USD)	Defense Budget (billion USD)	Defense Budget/ GDP(%)	Foreign Military Assistance (million USD)
Japan	4770	47.7	1	
Australia	1480	22.5	1.5	
South Korea	1450	34.4	2.4	
Taiwan*	505	10.1	2	
Thailand	380	5.69	1.5	1
Philippines	209	2.09	1	50
USA	17400	581	3.3	

Source: International Institute of Strategic Studies (2015).

\* Taiwan is not a formal treaty ally of the United States, which nevertheless maintains a security commitment to that insular country.

by spending 1.5 percent of GDP on defense. The Philippines—a key contestant for the South China Sea—only spends 1 percent of GDP, while receiving defense aid worth US\$50 million, on top of military and diplomatic support from the United States. Thailand, designated as a “major non-NATO ally,” also collects military aid while allocating only 1.5 percent of GDP to defense. Moreover, Bangkok is transforming into a mere security partner of Washington while strengthening its security ties with Beijing (Prasirtsuk and Tow, 2015).<sup>17</sup>

Also underpinning Washington's strong will to lead is American exceptionalism. Americans tend to believe that their country has admirable traits in extraordinary abundance (which separate it from all others)—namely, values such as liberty, equality, democracy (or “the American Creed”); and institutions upholding them (Lipset, 1996). For them, the United States is a biblical “city upon a hill” or a “beacon of the free world.” American exceptionalism is not an American exceptionality: the United States is not the only nation that subscribes to such a positive self-image and stresses its dispositional uniqueness. For example, the Chinese view themselves as special in having an inherently nonviolent character originating from their old-established Confucian culture and defensive-mindedness (Wang, 2011). Koreans, calling their country the “land of the morning calm,” pride themselves on being a distinctively peace-loving people that has never committed aggressions against others throughout its history of five millennia. What distinguishes the United States from countries like China and South Korea is its distinctive power position. Washington believes that its truly unique *combination* of preponderant power and laudable temperament makes its international leadership an “obligation,” “prerogative,” and even “manifest destiny” (Bacevich, 2008).<sup>18</sup> Such thinking naturally leads to Washington's fixation with supreme global leadership, and the world order mirroring its internal composition.

Ikenberry (2014: 73-78), and Gronning (2014).

<sup>17</sup> Since Thailand neither shares borders nor has territorial disputes with China, Bangkok faces little direct threat to its security from Beijing. China is also the number one trading partner of Thailand.

<sup>18</sup> Some US allies seem to share and reinforce this belief held by Washington. See Preble (2009: 89).

### 3. EMERGING STRATEGY: OFFSHORE LEADERSHIP

US international leadership is evolving as the strategic environment shifts. Other states—most notably, China—have been gaining power relative to the United States, by taking advantage of its economic stagnation, military exhaustion, and political distraction—all partly caused by the US obsession with global leadership. Consequently, American unipolarity is on the wane, although it is premature to pronounce its end (Pape, 2009; Layne, 2012). As US economic power—the principal foundation of its military strength—dwindles in relative terms, a new peer competitor will likely arise, though it is unclear how many and how soon.<sup>19</sup> Understanding this trend, China is demanding a “new type of great power relations” and a “multipolar world”—the latter in chorus with Russia—with growing assertiveness. Accordingly, Washington is formulating a new security strategy that can reconcile its still strong will to leadership with its diminishing power position.

America is introducing what I coin a strategy of offshore leadership. Its main goal is to remain the most influential leader in the security realm—not the sole leader but the first among equals. The strategy aims to attain this goal, by establishing a sphere of influence firmly over maritime and coastal regions (as opposed to inland areas) with naval and air power as primary means. Since the George W. Bush administration began to step back gradually from a hegemonic strategy of leading *alone* the entire international system during its second term, Washington has been accepting secondary leadership roles played by great powers like China and Russia.<sup>20</sup> To take a noteworthy example, America has entrusted China with mediation in its dealings with North Korea over the nuclear issue. However, Washington (which still desires to exercise a certain extent of international leadership) is not currently adopting a strategy of “offshore balancing” (which is distinct from offshore leadership) or isolationism as some scholars predict or advocate. (The offshore balancing abstains from exercising leadership to the extent possible and only plays minimal roles essential for preserving the balance of power; the isolationism rejects international roles and responsibilities altogether.) In other words, the United States presently is not pursuing a general “retrenchment”—full-scale renunciation of international roles and commitments: US resolve and power to lead remain robust.<sup>21</sup> Rather, it tries to share minor parts of its leadership roles with the other great powers as necessitated by the latter’s ascending power and assertiveness.

<sup>19</sup> The Soviet Union throughout the Cold War maintained its position of peer competitor to the United States with no more than half of the latter’s economic power. This means that a peer competitor does not require economic parity. China’s GDP already amounted to 54 percent of America’s in 2014.

<sup>20</sup> For example, the 2015 National Security Strategy of the United States “welcomes the constructive contributions of responsible rising powers” (The White House, 2015: 1).

A hegemonic strategy aims for hegemony defined as “the leadership of one state (the hegemon) over other states in the system” (Gilpin 1981: 116). On US hegemonic policy for Asia, see Mastanduno (2002: 193-196).

I am not arguing that the United States has abandoned what Mearsheimer and Walt (2016: 71) call a strategy of “liberal hegemony.” This strategy aims to “promote a world order based on international institutions, representative governments, open markets, and respect for human rights,” and “manage local politics almost everywhere” to that end. While regarding American leadership as necessary, the strategy leaves unanswered whether the United States must be a *sole* leader or not.

<sup>21</sup> In comparison, offshore leadership amounts to a partial retrenchment.

To remain the most influential of all leaders, the United States makes efforts to maintain its military and economic supremacy, while expanding its superior alliance portfolio. President Trump's inaugural address heralds continuation of these efforts over the coming years, by making a commitment to "winning" and vowing to "reinforce old alliances and form new ones."<sup>22</sup>

### **3.1. Maintaining Supreme Power**

In order to husband its superior capabilities, the United States strives for a smart employment of "all the instruments of power" (The White House, 2015). Accordingly, the United States has adopted a restrained defense posture that reflects its relative power decline and fiscal problem, as well as lessons learned from the above-mentioned excesses regarding the limited utility and unpredictable nature of military operation (the so-called Iraq syndrome).<sup>23</sup> It seeks to avoid using land power (which carries higher costs and risks), while instead relying on naval and air power to the extent possible. This preference is clearly reflected in the Obama administration's unyielding adherence to air operations against the Islamic State and other hostile militant groups without committing ground combat troops. In utilizing naval and air power, Washington prefers coercion through threatened employment to their actual application. The United States also wants to shift as much burden to its allies as possible in conducting military operations. When it comes to ground operations in particular, Washington tries to have its allies play primary roles. The United States over the past few years has outsourced ground operations in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan wholly to its local allies, while also planning to rely on the South Korean army in a local contingency.

The United States also has assumed a proactive diplomatic posture. The current National Security Strategy pronounces that "our first line of action is principled and clear-eyed diplomacy" (The White House, 2015). The Obama administration sought to solve important problems such as nuclear proliferation through negotiations in principle. Its tenacious adherence to the Iranian nuclear deal, despite potent domestic and international oppositions from certain quarters, reveals such an inclination; so does its bold diplomatic initiative to end a decades-long cold war with Cuba. In addition, Washington attempts to make the most of non-military instruments like commercial ties and international institutions for the purpose of maintaining its supreme position. Cases in point are America's pursuit of trade agreements for increasing its politico-economic influence and its employment of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) for dismantling Syrian chemical weapons.

In addition, the United States has tried to set clear priorities in foreign policy, as its diminishing relative power makes untenable its old practice of taking on multiple tasks of varying urgency at once. Washington now assigns a top priority to managing relations with great powers. Meanwhile, attention to terrorist organizations and rogue states has relatively diminished. Driving such readjustments in priorities are the magnified anxieties generated by China's rising power and Russia's growing assertiveness. As Americans have not experienced large-scale terrorist attacks since the 9/11 incidents and have concluded the preventive

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<sup>22</sup> President Trump's Inaugural Address, January 20, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address>. Accessed April 1, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> The latest National Security Strategy (The White House, 2015: iv) states "we must recognize a smart national security strategy does not rely solely on military power." On the Iraq syndrome, see Mueller (2005).

war against Iraq was unnecessary, their threat perceptions on terrorist organizations and rogue states have lowered to a realistic level (although some of President Trump's top aides apparently have a heightened sense of danger). The fact that a satisfactory solution is unavailable to the North Korean nuclear armament is another reason for Washington's reduced attention to rogue states. Pyongyang has declared its determination to keep its atomic weapons, by enshrining its nuclear-armed status in the constitution and refusing to participate in any talks aimed at nuclear disarmament. What measures might conceivably change Pyongyang's mind is highly unclear, after the two decades of trying a variety of methods—both hawkish and dovish—without success. It makes little political sense for the White House to invest its scarce political capital in such an endeavor with a slim chance of success, especially with domestic challenges such as unemployment looming large.

With America's renewed focus on great-power relations, Asia has become central to American strategic thinking (Panetta, 2012). Asia (which contains all the key great powers like China and Russia, as well as major candidates such as Japan and India) is becoming what Hans Morgenthau dubbed a "dominant system" or "center of world politics" (Morgenthau, 1993). Hence, America's "pivot to Asia" may be inevitable over the long haul. In the short-to-medium run, however, America's actual return to the region could meet significant delays due to more urgent (if lesser) problems elsewhere, including instabilities in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan; Iranian nuclear development; and tensions over Ukraine. Even if America eventually resolves all these matters and finally returns to Asia, much of its ground forces would not come along. The enhancement of naval and air capabilities would constitute the backbone of America's "rebalancing" toward Asia.<sup>24</sup> This is because the United States envisions an essentially maritime strategy for Asia.

### 3.2. Building a Superior Coalition

In the crucial Asian region, the United States intends to consolidate its position of the most influential state by strengthening its grip on the maritime and coastal areas of the region (Panetta, 2012).<sup>25</sup> This means building a permanent US-led coalition of maritime and coastal nations. For an offshore power like the United States relying primarily on naval-air capabilities, a maritime area is a first priority; a coastal area the second: these areas provide optimal bases of operation. Moreover, controlling these areas (maritime areas in particular)

<sup>24</sup> The former US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's exposition of rebalancing at the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue reveals its maritime nature clearly (Panetta, 2012). His plan for regional force enhancement predominantly concerned naval and air capabilities—except deployment of small marine contingents. In addition, his list of key allies and partners notably included maritime and coastal nations only.

<sup>25</sup> Going beyond the common classification of nations into continental and maritime powers, I propose a refined typology dividing continental powers into coastal and inland nations. According to this novel typology, Russia and China are both continental powers yet of different kinds: whereas Russia is an inland power, China is a coastal power. This distinction can explain why China presently makes greater efforts to build a powerful navy than Russia does. The classification of maritime/coastal/inland powers is primarily based on three criteria—(1) a state's geographical location; (2) the ratio (i.e., relative length) of its coastline to land border; and (3) the location of its politico-economic centers. Maritime powers can be further divided into littoral states (insular nations located on or near the continental shelf such as Taiwan) and pelagic states (insular nations far off the coast like Australia). The former is more susceptible to continental states' influence, due to its geographical proximity, than is the latter. For the dichotomous typology, see Ross (1999; 2009) and Levy and Thompson (2010).

is less difficult for an offshore power possessing naval and air supremacy. Strengthening and expanding the coalition as such can add to US influence in two ways: (1) by forging asymmetric partnerships with lesser states, the United States can extract sizeable leverage from their dependence; (2) by using this leverage, Washington can harness its partners' influence for shaping the behavior of other states.

In Asia, America already has made substantial progress in bringing into its coalition South Korea, Japan, Australia, Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. These are either maritime nations or coastal states sharing no land borders with continental great powers like China or Russia. Therefore, superior naval-air power at the US disposal can establish dominant influence over them without much challenge, while the continental powers' large armies are not of as much use. Nonetheless, these states have little reason to perceive a security threat from the United States—an offshore maritime power with no territorial ambition in their region.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, many of them have maritime territorial disputes with China, and therefore feel threatened by Chinese power.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, the United States is trying to bring onboard India, Vietnam, and Myanmar—coastal nations bordering China. While geographical proximity can help China project its land power and thereby extend influence more effectively to these countries (than to those above-mentioned nations), US naval-air power can prove equally competitive in the coastal areas. In addition, China's massive land power—a primary instrument for conquest—is potentially most threatening to these states, which would therefore likely prefer aligning themselves with the United States if they have to choose. Moreover, India and Vietnam have additional reasons to fear China, due to their conflicting territorial claims.

A successful construction of the coalition anchored in the maritime and coastal areas would suffice to place the United States in a superior position vis-à-vis China or Russia, since the bulk of Asia's wealth and strength is located there. This point is borne out by examining the distribution of power among Asia's non-great powers—the group of states which Washington (potentially) vies with Beijing or Moscow to win over.<sup>28</sup> Maritime states belonging to the group account for 63.7 percent of the total sum of all its members' GDP figures; coastal and maritime states combine to make up 97 percent. Furthermore,

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<sup>26</sup> As for asymmetrical alliances, a non-great power's preference matters less than the relative weight of power that rival great powers can bring to bear. A weak state often has to align with the most threatening state against its own will, because no rival great power can help it resist pressures. An asymmetrical alliance oftentimes does not result from a non-great power's voluntary choice, but from a decision made by the winner in a great-power contest for influence. A weak state's preference can be an important determinant, only when the competing great powers wield equal influence.

<sup>27</sup> Maritime territory is fairly important to insular and coastal nations, especially to those depending heavily on seaborne trade and fishery. South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, and the Philippines have territorial disputes over the East China or the South China Sea.

<sup>28</sup> The analysis includes countries listed in the Asia section of *Military Balance* (International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2015) and five Central Asian states. It excludes North Korea since relevant statistics are unavailable from *Military Balance* and comparable sources. Adding North Korea would not alter the broad finding that the maritime-coastal areas contain greater wealth and strength than does the inland area: its GDP and defense spending are relatively small, and it is a coastal state.

Influence over the examined group of lesser states can crucially affect the strategic positions of great powers. The group's collective GDP is 1.4 times larger than China's and 6.5 times greater than Russia's. The defense expenditure of the group is 1.8 times larger than that of China and 3.2 times that of Russia.

maritime states account for 50.1 percent of the group's total defense expenditure (sum of all its members' military budgets); adding coastal states to the calculus raises the proportion to 96.3 percent. As the leader of this dominant party in regional politics, Washington can sustain the current international order reflecting its preferences closely, while making selective compromises (where necessary) with other major players, including China and Russia (Tow, 2015).<sup>29</sup> Adding Russia—an inland great power—to the group necessitates no major alteration to this assessment: maritime and coastal states account for 84 percent of the expanded group's total GDP and 73.4 percent of its defense expenditure.<sup>30</sup> Maritime states alone make up 55.1 percent of GDP and 38.2 percent of military budget. This implies that the United States heading the coalition of maritime and coastal nations would have a substantial advantage over a China that commands all the inland states including Russia; reigning over maritime Asia alone would give Washington a fair chance to stop Beijing from holding the top.

The United States makes efforts to consolidate and expand its sphere of influence, primarily with an eye to China—an aspirant leader and emerging rival. To that end, Washington supports and thereby courts its (present and prospective) coalition partners, which are expected to be reliant and therefore pliant (Brooks *et al.*, 2012). In order to minimize associated costs, the United States primarily employs its superior naval-air-nuclear capabilities, while limiting its use of ground forces to the minimum. For example, the United States props up China's antagonists in territorial disputes over the South China Sea indirectly, by demanding a peaceful settlement founded on dialogue and international law: banning force would neutralize China's military advantages *vis-à-vis* other weaker disputants (Panetta, 2012). Washington takes a more direct stance with respect to the East China Sea, expressing a willingness to fight for Japan's claims on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The United States backs up its commitments with a show of force in the form of naval and aerial patrolling and exercise. Although these maritime territorial disputes have the potential to create instabilities, they present favorable opportunities for Washington to increase its regional influence at the expense of Beijing. The United States can utilize its superior naval-air power to intervene in those concerned maritime areas at relatively low risks and costs.<sup>31</sup> In addition, China's

<sup>29</sup> The (fairly realistic) assumption here is that America's own power neither falls far behind that of China or Russia nor is largely diverted to other regions.

<sup>30</sup> These figures represent the lower bounds of the proportions. Adding China to the calculus raises the proportions, given that it is a coastal great power: with China included, maritime and coastal states combine to take up 90 percent of GDP and 81.2 percent of military expenditure. Maritime states account for 34.3 percent of GDP and 27 percent of defense budget. However, adding China does not serve the analytical purpose of understanding how controlling specific sub-regions would affect the US position relative to the country. It merely helps establish that Asia's economic and military power is concentrated in the maritime-coastal areas.

<sup>31</sup> Montgomery (2014) argues that US power projection to the Western Pacific is fast becoming a formidable task, given China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities and geographical proximity. Although his consideration of geographical factors is useful, his conclusion is an overstatement overall. Since China shares land borders with continental great powers such as Russia and the United States, it cannot focus too much on building naval and air power. In contrast, the United States has no such powerful neighbors, and therefore can direct most of its efforts to strengthening naval-air power (if necessary). Moreover, some contested areas of the Western Pacific such as the South China Sea are located farther from Chinese bases than from US (potential) bases. Finally, the United States has maritime allies such as Japan that possess substantial naval-air power, while China has none.

unilateral actions not only frighten other contestants, but also worry regional bystanders by apparently revealing its territorial ambition and overbearing disposition. Beijing's rejection of multi-party dialogues on the disputes also embarrasses the ASEAN members that have promoted multilateral diplomacy as their favorite mechanism for conflict resolution.

Other instruments for strengthening ties and increasing influence include US-initiated commercial arrangements such as Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and shared values like liberal democracy.<sup>32</sup> For instance, Washington has built with Seoul a so-called "comprehensive strategic alliance" based not only on common security interests but also on an FTA and shared liberal democratic values; this is also true with Australia (The White House, 2013). The United States is moving on a similar path with Japan. With commercial exchanges expanding, the allies' asymmetric dependence on the larger, more advanced US economy would increase, thereby conferring greater influence on Washington. In addition, to the extent that the democratic partners embrace the cause of ideological solidarity, the United States can legitimize its leadership as *the* liberal democratic icon of the world. Inculcating liberal values into an authoritarian state (like Myanmar) is expected to raise its receptiveness to US "soft power" (Nye, 2004).

Beside such acts of courting, Washington is also demanding role-expansion and burden-sharing from its core allies (e.g., Japan, South Korea, and Australia) that have firmly accepted American leadership and acquired substantial capabilities (Tow, 2015; Panetta, 2012). In US strategic planning, these key allies must act as deputies and combine to constitute the core of the Washington-led coalition.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Throughout the post-Cold War presidencies, Washington consistently has shown a strong will to lead global politics, which reflected the confluence of unipolarity, inner conviction, and external instigation. Consequently, the United States has tried to extend its leadership deeper and deeper into coastal and inland areas. In Europe, armed interventions were made in Bosnia and Kosovo, and NATO was expanded to Central and then Eastern Europe including some parts of Russia's immediate vicinity. In Asia, the United States took the initiative in dealing with North Korea, and later fought a ground war in landlocked Afghanistan. The Middle East saw the US invasion and occupation of Iraq and limited military interventions in coastal states such as Libya and Syria. However, many of these actions produced major failures or side effects, as US power showed limits in remote coastal and (to a greater extent) inland areas. These failures—in tandem with other states' ascendance—have been eroding American unipolarity and thereby causing a steady transition in US international leadership. In Asia, the United States strives to remain the most influential leader, *inter alia* by maintaining its supremacy in naval-air power and establishing a firm grip on maritime and coastal areas.

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For these reasons, Chinese A2/AD capabilities will likely remain no match for US power projection capabilities for long.

<sup>32</sup> The White House (2015: 15, 19) stated: "Sustaining our leadership depends on shaping an emerging global economic order that continues to reflect our interests and values"; "To lead effectively in a world experiencing significant political change, the United States must live our values at home while promoting universal values abroad."

Completion of this strategic transition will take quite some time: American unipolarity—especially its military component—is fading away only at a sluggish pace, and learning about old and new systemic constraints is incomplete and reversible. Moreover, it is uncertain that the offshore leadership strategy will produce a stable equilibrium, once the transition is completed. As the strategy effects a partial retrenchment, for example, the US power position might rebound (MacDonald and Parent, 2011). Accordingly, the United States might slip back into being ambitious, complacent, proud, and susceptible to incitement; therefore, it could backtrack from the transition. Alternatively, as its power continues to wane, the United States could move on to adopt a more restrained strategy of offshore balancing or even isolationism. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that US offshore leadership will arrive and stay long: this strategic option most befits both the US will to lead and its unalterable geopolitical identity of maritime power. This strategy is particularly suitable for the “dominant system” of Asia, in which maritime and coastal areas contain the bulk of wealth and strength.

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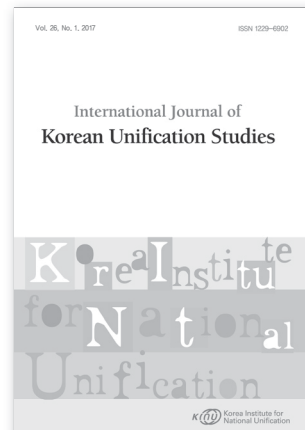
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