



## Rebalancing great power politics: a new cold war between the US and China

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### A study of the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region

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## **List of Abbreviations**

A2/AD = Anti-access/anti-denial

ADIZ = Air Defense Identification Zone

ASB = Air Sea Battle concept

CSBA = Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

DSG = Defense Strategic Guidance

DoD = Department of Defense

GDP = Gross Domestic Product

IISS = International Institute for Strategic Studies

PLA = the People's Liberation Army

QDR = Quadrennial Defense Review

SIPRI = Stockholm International Peace Research Centre

SSQ = Strategic Studies Quarterly

TTP = Trans- Pacific Partnership

US = United States

WTO = World Trade Organization

## Introduction

Many in the West seem to believe that the post- Cold War period marked a change in how great powers interact with one another. We have entered a world in which principles rather than power considerations seems to guide the US national interest. In her famous article, Francis Fukuyama argued that:

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. (Fukuyama, 1989, p.5)

According to Mearsheimer (2001) this perspective suggests that great powers no longer view each other as potential military rivals, but instead as members of a family of nations, members of what is sometimes called the ‘international community’. This is not the world as understood by Realists. Is there a withering of great power *Realpolitik* after the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War?

The post- Cold War period has seen the United States becoming the most powerful country in the world by far. It has also witnessed the immense rise of China to a great power. January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 marked the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties between the United States and China. From the perspective of human history, thirty-five years might seem negligible. Yet, for US-China relations these thirty-five years mark a milestone of unusual and extraordinary years with far-reaching significance. The United States and China can neither be described as true allies nor as true enemies. Throughout the years, the US-China relationship has been generally stable and calm with some periods of tension, but no serious conflicts with far-stretching consequences appeared. However, the current relationship between the US and China is complex and multifaceted. In 2011, Barack Obama introduced a pivot of US foreign policy towards the Asia Pacific region. In his so called Canberra speech<sup>1</sup>, Obama stated:

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<sup>1</sup> He gave this speech in the city Canberra, Australia.

“I have directed my national security team to make our presence and missions in the Asia-Pacific a top priority. The United States is a Pacific power and we are here to stay (...) Let there be no doubt: in the Asia-Pacific of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States of America is all in. The United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with allies and friends”. (Obama, 2011, Canberra speech)

The announcement of a US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region instantly became a widely discussed topic. Reactions about the announcement differed, but on one thing most analysts and officials agreed: this policy change will have consequences for the relationship between the US and China. As Kishore Mahbubani summarizes:

“Throughout history, the most important geopolitical relationship has been between the world’s greatest power – currently the U.S. – and the world’s greatest emerging power – currently China. Normally, we should have seen rising geopolitical tensions between the two. Instead, we have witnessed an unusual calm. That era, however, is now coming to an end”. (Mahbubani, 2011, p. 1)

As Lieberthal (2012) points out, the core message of the US pivot towards the Asia Pacific is that “America is going to play a leadership role in Asia for decades to come” (Lieberthal, 2012, section 1). Former US Foreign Minister Hillary Clinton stated: “We need to press forward and renew our leadership” (Clinton, 2011, section 3). While the rebalancing of US foreign policy officially is directed towards the entire Asia Pacific region -- spanning both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean -- it is widely argued that the policy is directed to containing China’s growth because the US is expanding its military presence and excludes China from important negotiations like the Trans Pacific Partnership (Lieberthal, 2011). In reaction, Hillary Clinton openly admitted that “one of the most prominent of the emerging partners [in the Asia-Pacific region] is, of course, China” (Clinton 2011, section 17) , but she rejected the view that the US pivot towards the Asia Pacific is directed to constraining China by stating that: “We [the US and China] have both much more to gain from cooperation than from conflict” (Clinton 2011, section 18). After explaining the specific elements of the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific – which I will discuss later on – she concluded with:

(...)“ Even more than our military might or the size of our economy, our most potent asset as a nation is the power of our values – in particular our steadfast support for democracy and human rights. This speaks to our deepest national character and is at the heart of our foreign policy, including our strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific region”.  
(Clinton, 2011, section 23)

In these thesis I will analyze the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific asking the following research question:

*To what extent does the strategic US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region reflect US power maximizing interests towards China?*

This thesis falls within a growing body of literature on US-China relations. Using offensive realist theory to analyze the case, I will argue that despite the liberal rhetoric of the pivot or rebalancing policy, its actions are driven by Cold War thinking of power maximization. To answer the research question, I will carry out an extensive case-study and adopt the congruence method. This thesis will be conducted through an extensive literature analysis and the use of some relevant figures to strengthen my arguments. The main findings of these thesis are that the United States employs offensive realist strategies like buck-passing and bait-and-bleed. Hereby, the United States intensifies its strategic security competition with China and indirectly started a new Cold war. The findings of this thesis are both socially and scientifically relevant since they broaden our knowledge about the explanatory power of offensive realism and what is set to be the most important bilateral relationship of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **1. Explaining the US China policy**

There is no lack of scholarly literature on the complex topic of US China policy. Some scholars focus on the distinction of realist versus liberalist explanations of US China policy. Others focus on the impact of events in constructing and (re)shaping US foreign policy. Finally, some analyze US foreign policy on the basis of different US presidents and its administrations.

The main wave of explanations are situated among a debate whether 'rising' China is a status quo or a revisionist power (Lieberthal, 2012; Turner, 2014). While some enhance the view of China a "responsible stakeholder" within the international system (Zoellick 2005, speech to the National Committee), some view China as a relentless revisionist state only seeking for power. It should be noted that most literature situated among this debate is written by American scholars. Indeed, Ross and Zhu (2008) point out that scholars tend to focus on the US rather than China to understand its 'rise' and its impact on international politics.

In essence, the debate is about whether we should understand US foreign policy from a liberalist or a realist view. In his book *Theoretical Roots of US Foreign Policy: Machiavelli and American Unilateralism*, Thomas Kane (2006) argues that the underpinnings of US foreign politics can be traced back to a cynical realist perspective on politics as established by Machiavelli. Realism holds the view that world politics is driven by competitive self-interest, power, and the will to dominate. From a realist view, China is considered to be a great danger to vital US interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Realists therefore suggest a policy of containing against China (Layne, 2011 ; Mearsheimer, 2001). As Nick Kitchen points out, much on the literature on emerging powers and American hegemony, particularly that coming out of the United States itself, is driven by the assumptions of power transition theory and a neorealist understanding of power, system and structure. This neorealist view originates from a Cold War understanding of the nature of international politics where naval powers are preeminent, and where GDP buys military assets which in turn generates political power (Kitchen, 2014).

Contrary to realists, liberalists have an optimistic view on international politics. A cornerstone of idealist theories in addressing US China policy is the democratic peace theory. This theory claims that democracies do not go to war against other democracies. Therefore, liberalists argue that the US seeks to engage with China. Former president Wilson once stated that it is America's obligation to "spread its principles throughout the world". So a liberal concept pledges for a more cooperative, forward-looking policy towards China and Asia as a whole, saying that such cooperation would serve Asian (including Chinese) interests as well as American interests.



Mearsheimer argues that moralism and optimism is deep seated in American society and therefore “official foreign US- China policy often sounds as if it has been lifted right out of a Liberalism 101 lecture”. (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 23)

In a limited way, some authors observed that the US China policy contains both realist and liberal aspects. Koshy observed as what he calls ‘congagement’: the US wants cooperation with China and so pursues engagement. At the same time, it wants to restrain it by a policy of containment (Koshy, 2013).

Extending the debate on explaining US China policy, some authors stress the importance of historical events as a transforming element for US foreign policy. Well known events that had an impact in (re)shaping American foreign policy were World War II, the Cold War and the events of 9/11. Fukuyama (1989) argued that the end of the Cold War might mark the celebration of democracy and a new era of soft power politics.

Dumbrell and Owens (2008) argued that due to the events of 9/11, an understanding of a perceived terrorist threat became Washington’s key priority. It’s policy towards China therefore automatically loosened. So in literature events also play an important role in explaining US China policy.

A third wave in explaining and describing US China policy consists of extensive analyses of US presidents and its administrations – often compared with each other. In order to be elected, every president wants to distinguish itself from its predecessor and has personal preferences and skills. Every administration has its distinctive features on US China policy. For example, Dodge (2008) argues that George W. Bush’s emphasis on ideology was distinctive from previous China policies. Dodge also argues that the ineffectiveness of Bush’s China policy in his first half of his first term might be due to his inexperience. However, despite personal differences, the US has a variety of foreign policy traditions to draw upon that overlap, reinforce and sometimes conflict with each other. In order to identify these traditions, Walter Mead (2001) linked questions about whether China can, or should be seen a status quo or revisionist power with an extensive analysis of US president and administrations. Mead distinguishes four different traditions in US foreign policy. Realists who prudently pursue national interest and commerce are named after Alexander Hamilton. Populists, who emphasize self-reliance and frequent use of coercion are named after

Andrew Jackson. 'Jeffersonians' are called those who pursue democracy by being a shining beacon to others rather than going forth in search of monsters to destroy. Finally, 'Wilsonians' are the idealists who follow Woodrow Wilson in seeking to make the world safe for democracy.

This thesis will draw upon the neorealist explanation of US foreign policy and US China policy.

## **2. An offensive realist explanation of the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific**

Through history and within the field of international relations, the tenets of realism have provided explanatory answers to questions about state behavior. This thesis will use a branch of realism called offensive realism. As Quinn argues, the main relevance of a structural realist perspective lies in its treatment of hegemonic power and the question of its sustainability (Quinn, 2014, p. 5). Offensive realism has been established by John J. Mearsheimer in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. His theory "*challenges the prevailing optimism about relations among the great powers*" (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 20). To Mearsheimer, power politics is tragic because the inherent insecurity in the structure of international politics will always drive states to compete with each other and, ideally, become a hegemon. According to Mearsheimer, and also generally accepted among other scholars, the United States is the only great power that achieved hegemony.

Offensive realism is the ideal tool to analyze the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific for several reasons. First of all, offensive realism is pessimistic. It does not predict the durability of US hegemony like defensive realists, since it argues that new great powers will merge to offset US power (Layne, 2002). It is now clear that such a great power has merged, namely China. Another key concept in explaining US behavior is the offensive realist notion of potential hegemon. China is the only great power that can possibly achieve hegemony. Defensive realists argue (Waltz, 1979) that states are only interested in maximizing power until a certain point when it becomes a status quo power concerned with balancing. However, in explaining the pivot, Hillary Clinton (2011) points out that the United States wants to lead. This assumes that the United States is still interested in maximizing its power and that it has no intention to solely become a status quo power concerned with balancing. Indeed, this

thesis will show that the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region is an answer to China's acquired position as a potential hegemon. It should be noted that Mearsheimer (2001) argues that because of what he calls the 'stopping power of water', a state can only achieve regional hegemony and not global hegemony. Christopher Layne (2012) argues, and I agree, that this is a flaw in Mearsheimer's theory. To me, it is odd that Mearsheimer uses the example of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, since the example also showed that troops can be easily transported and that water doesn't have to be an obstacle. Since great powers always seek to maximize its powers, global hegemony fits in the very logic of offensive realism. Therefore, I will adopt the criticism of Christopher Layne and recognize the US as a global hegemony, not just a regional one. In attributing the concept of potential hegemony to China, I will refer to regional hegemony though. This because a state first must attain regional hegemony in order to bid for global hegemony. Since China is no regional hegemon yet, I will refer to China as a potential regional hegemon.

A third reason that makes offensive realism the ideal tool to analyze the US pivot towards the Asia Pacific region is that it offers a more compelling description of the balance of power than other structural realist theories like defensive realism, claiming that states only seek to maintain their position in the balance of power. Defensive realists argue that the balancing imperative does not permit power concentrations as described by offensive realism. According to Waltz states pursue "an appropriate amount of power (...) states will only seek the minimum level of power that is need to attain and maintain their security and survival" (Waltz 1979, 40). Proponents of defensive realism consider the pursuit of hegemony therefore foolish. According to offensive realism, great powers prefer buck passing rather than joining balancing coalitions. The US has made several alliances with China's surrounding countries and is thereby acting as an offshore balancer. So the concept of off-shore balancer plays a key role in explaining the strategic back-to-Asia-Pacific approach. It explains why the US has maintained superior power advantages without suffering balancing and why it won't be able to gain power advantages over China. Therefore, competition between the US and China will intensify.

Mearsheimer (2001) derives his theory from five bedrock assumptions about the international system. First of all, the world is anarchic. Because there is no higher authority about the state, nation states are compelled to rely on themselves. Second, great powers

have the potential to go to war since they possess some offensive military capabilities.

Third, states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. Fourth, the primary goal of great powers is survival. Mearsheimer points out that “ (...) states seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order” (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 32). So a state might attack another state, not because it feels a certain aggression towards the other state, but to secure its security, because it fears that the other state might otherwise attack. The fifth and last assumption holds that states are rational actors considering their strategic environment.

These five assumptions are mutually reinforcing elements. The patterns of state behavior according to offensive realism can be seen in three layers: fear concerning their survival, self-help in the anarchic world and power maximization.

These patterns of behavior provide states with four operational goals. First, great powers strive for hegemony. The United States already achieved this goal. Second, great powers will try to maximize its wealth, since wealth supports power. In order to maintain and strengthen its position as a global hegemon, the United States strives for maximizing its wealth, so it can continuously facilitate its military power that is needed to sustain leadership and to beat back any bids from the potential hegemon, China. As Kitchen (2014) points out, wealth buys military assets which in turn generates political power. So increasing both wealth and military capabilities are important goals for a great power in order to maintain hegemony and to deter potential peers. Third, armies supported by air and sea capabilities are the core ingredient of military power. The last operational goal is to achieve nuclear superiority. This is the ultimate goal of power maximization.

These operational goals offers states tactical and strategic guidance on foreign policy choices. A first category of tactics and strategies is concerned with gaining power over a (potential) rival. War is the most controversial strategy that great powers can use employ to gain power over other states (Mearsheimer , 2001, p. 147). The feasibility of war as a tool has been criticized a lot. Mearsheimer notes that warfare demands sound judgment and allocation of resources to improve a state's relative power. A war must be efficiently and effectively executed for optimal results. A more attractive alternative to warfare is blackmailing. Blackmailing is the threat of force, without the actual use of it. It is thus

relatively cost-free. However, this strategy is not effective when dealing with another great power that has a comparable military, nor does it shift the balance of power as an action on its own. The third strategy that states might employ to increase their relative power is bait and bleed. This strategy involves "causing two rivals to engage in a protracted war, so that they bleed each other white, while the baiter remains on the sideline" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 153). A great power will prefer a bait-and-bleed strategy in gaining power over their (potential) rivals. Going to war is often too risky and blackmailing not effective enough. A bait-and-bleed strategy is a cost-friendly strategy. It allows a great power to minimize its efforts, while other powers do all the work to achieve the goals of the great power. This strategy can be combined with buck-passing.

Great powers not only seek to gain power over their rivals, but they also aim to prevent those foes from gaining power at their expense. So the second category of tactics is checking the aggressor. The main strategies here are balancing and buck-passing. States prefer the strategy of buck-passing, but sometimes they have no choice but to balance against the threat. With balancing, a great power takes direct responsibility for preventing an aggressor from upsetting the balance of power. The initial goal is to deter the aggressor, but if that fails, the balancing state will fight the ensuing war. States can employ three measures to make balancing work. First, they can send clear signals to the aggressor through diplomatic channels that they are firmly committed to maintaining the balance of power, even if it means going to war. Second, states can employ 'external balancing', in creating a defensive alliance with other states so they can join forces to contain the dangerous opponent. The benefits notwithstanding, external balancing is often slow and inefficient. Third, states can employ internal balancing, which is self-help in the purest sense of the term. Internal balancing holds that states can balance against an aggressor by mobilizing additional resources of their own. Because states are concerned with power maximization, they are engaged in internal balancing all the time (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 157).

The main alternative to balancing is buck-passing. Buck-passing and putting together a balancing coalition obviously represent contrasting ways of dealing with an aggressor. Nevertheless, there is a strong tendency to buck-passing inside balancing coalitions. A hegemon tries to keep other regions divided among several great powers, so that these states will compete with each other and be unable to focus on the hegemon. It will act as an

offshore balancer. This means that a hegemon prefers a strategy of buck-passing: it transfers the responsibility to act onto other states while remaining on the sidelines. The local powers check the aspiring hegemon first. Only when local powers fail, the hegemon intervenes to make sure the aspiring hegemon will be defeated (Layne, 2012, p. 124). There are four tactics of buck-passing: 1) maintain good relations with the aggressor state to delay its aggression in the hope that it may be redirected to the buck-catcher. 2) Maintain distance from the would-be buck-catcher to avoid being caught in the conflict on its side against the aggressor. 3) develop and build defenses to deter the aggressor and make him turn his sights toward the weaker buck-catcher. 4) Allow or facilitate the growth of the buck-catcher as a means to further balance an aggressor while remaining on the sidelines.

In sum, I have outlined and explained how states according to offensive realism maximize their power, focusing on the specific goals they pursue as well as strategies they employ to achieve those goals. Drawing in these insights I posit the following hypotheses:

H1) The more the US is seeking power maximization, the more it will try to increase its wealth and military capabilities in order to sustain and strengthen its hegemonic position and to prevent China from achieving regional hegemony.

H2) the more the US is seeking power maximization, the more it will use a strategy of bait and bleed against China.

H3) The more the US is seeking power maximization, the more it will use a strategy of buck-passing against China.

### **3. Research Design**

To answer the research question I will use a case study design. Case study research is a prominent mean by which inquiry is conducted in social sciences. Despite the widespread use of case studies in the social sciences, no consensus has emerged as to the proper definition as on its design and methodology. To classify a specific type of case study, I follow the widespread case study analysis of George and Bennett (2005). George and Bennett (2005) emerged with six types of case studies. This study will be classified as a disciplined configurative case study. A disciplined configurative case study is a study where established

theories are used to explain a case. In this thesis, offensive realism will be my guiding theory to explain the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region. This case study is a theoretical case study that aims to seek a theory, rather than to test one. I am not trying to test the validity and scope conditions of realism, but in using the explanatory power of offensive realism in analyzing the US back-to-the-Asia-Pacific policy. I will therefore adopt the congruence method. The essential characteristic of this case study method is that “the researcher begins with a theory and then attempts to assess its ability to explain or predict the outcome in a particular case” (George and Bennett, 2005, p.181). An important general standard for congruence tests is congruity: similarity in the relative strength and duration of hypothesized causes and observed effects (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 183).

This thesis will be conducted through an extensive literature analysis. I will mostly use offensive realist literature, since I’m also conducting this research from a realist perspective. I will also consider some other theories and explanations in order to isolate the offensive realist explanatory power in answering my research question. I will also collect data from speeches and officials statements from US officials and the US foreign ministry.

However, when applying the congruence method, a problem arises. George and Bennett (2005) point out that researchers must guard against unjustified, questionable imputation of a causal relationship on the basis of mere consistency. To deal with this problem, I will also use some datasets. These datasets will provide additional information on the power maximization interests of the US regarding China.

The dependent variable examined in this thesis is the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region. Much of the pivot to the Asia-Pacific region is a continuation and expansion of policies already undertaken by previous administrations. Feigenbaum (2011) argues that:

“The Obama Administration follows a long line of US governments that, since the end of World War II, has sought to underpin stability and security in the Asia-Pacific by maintaining a large troop presence in East Asia and by involving the United States in most major diplomatic developments in the region”. (Feigenbaum, 2011)

It is true that the word shift might overstate the situation. Rebalancing might be a better description. However, in this thesis I will argue that although the US policy is not entirely

new, it is of significant importance for US-China relations for several reasons. First of all, China's economic rise, followed by its large military build-up makes it a potential hegemon. Second, according to offensive realism the United States will try to contain China by 1) increasing US wealth and at the same time containing China's wealth and, most importantly, will try to increase its military capabilities and at the same time containing China's military power. To reach this goals, the United States will use strategies of buck-passing and bait-and-bleed.

The independent variable is power maximization. The concept of power maximization has already been described in the previous chapter. The independent variable will be defined as the use of military and economic means to influence the behavior or interests of other political actors. Power maximization is a form of hard power. Hard power contrasts with soft power, which comes from diplomacy, culture and history and is linked to liberalism (Copeland, 2010). Hard power is a more aggressive form of power than soft power. In realist perspective, hard power is both rational and guided by national interest and survival. The indicators of military and economic means will serve as the operationalization of the independent variable.

To operationalize the independent variable I will use several indicators of hard power maximization. The first indicator is increasing wealth. Since wealth provides military capabilities, it is expected that the United States will try to increase its wealth.

Since wealth facilitates military capabilities, it is expected that the pivot will seek an increase in US military capabilities.

The second indicator is buck-passing. As I already mentioned, in offensive realism a hegemon prefers a strategy of buck-passing over balancing. So reality should show that the United States acts as an offshore balancer towards the Asia-Pacific region.



#### **4. Background and 'push' factors: disillusionment with the global 'war on terror'**

In order to explain the significance of the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific, I will first analyze how it differs from past US foreign policy. In this way, I will be able to isolate the specific elements of the US pivot and construct arguments to what extent it reflects power maximizing interests towards China.

The dramatic 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States enforced thorough changes in the direction of US foreign policy. For years, the understanding of a terrorist threat was the top priority of US foreign policy (Turner, 2014, p. 222). As Bush stated:

“Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime”. (Bush 2001, )

After the terrorist attacks of 2001, the issue of national security was restored as the core principle of US foreign policy (Barnett, 2009, p. 9). Most importantly, the observed terrorist threat motivated and justified among many the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. For a decade, these arenas acted as magnets for “enormous accounts of American efforts and resources” (Turner, 2014, p. 222). During this time, it also became clear that the terrorist threat against the United States had been “largely misunderstood and exaggerated (...) and worse, the financial costs of the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have been far outweighed by those of human life” (Turner, 2014, p. 222). Bush’s record in Afghanistan and Iraq has been widely criticized for affecting overall US security adversely, while the official statement from Washington holds that its goals are steadily being achieved.

During its first nine months in office, many analysts point to the Bush administration’s provocative and incoherent approach to China, which has been attributed to inexperience on the part of both president and its cabinet. However, Bush’s focus on the Middle East region and the ‘global war on terror’<sup>2</sup> since 2001, automatically caused a looser policy

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘global war on terror’ is a term which has been applied by George W. Bush to an international military campaign that started after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

towards the Asian region and China. Indeed, Wu Xinbo complains that US Asia policy under George W. Bush has been driven by events, rather than by a deep understanding of changes going on in the Asia region (Xinbo, 2008, p. 155). In analyzing the Bush administration's approach towards China, Chi Wang (2008, p. 13) noted that it operated in a highly centralized manner, with the top leadership closely managing all aspects of foreign policy. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the view of top officials on issues central to the US-China relationship. Actions by the president and officials demonstrated the view of China as a "strategic competitor". For example, in her first year (2005) as Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice moved to improve ties with Japan while distancing herself from the Chinese government. Furthermore, some have interpreted the president's courting of India as a strategic step to balance China's growing global influence; this was in particular demonstrated by Bush's efforts to plot a nuclear partnership with India's internationally marginalized nuclear program. However, Wang argues that eventually "the influence of those who labeled China as a "strategic competitor" waned in favor of individuals who sought to engage China" (Wang, 2008, p. 13). Kane (2009) on the other hand argued that Bush's China approach indicated realism rather than liberalism with a "heightened tendency for unilateralism" (Kane, 2009, p. 9). One thing is clear: US China policy under George W. Bush could be labeled as loose since Bush paid more attention to the Middle East region, fighting a 'global war on terror'. It is worthy to note that while the US foreign policy of the Bush administration is widely criticized, the lack of a serious US-China confrontation in the years since 9/11 is probably the most "important dog that did not bark" (Barnett, 2009, p. 13). As Barnett argues:

"We can always complain that the Bush-Cheney administration didn't do more to solidify what was the most important bilateral relationship of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but we cannot fault them for any lasting mistakes, and that alone is quite impressive".  
(Barnett, 2009, p. 15)

Yet, disillusionment with the purpose, cost, and efficacy of the 'global war on terror' served as key 'push' factors for a change in US foreign policy.

## **5. Motivating the pivot by key 'pull' factors: the dragon's new teeth and the concept of potential hegemony**

At the same time the 'push' factors demanded a change in US foreign policy, key 'pull' factors triggered and motivated a reorientation of US foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific region. These 'pull' factors also explain why China can be considered as a potential hegemon. Before explaining why China has emerged as a potential hegemon, it is worthy to note that it must be remembered that, historically, hegemony has been a natural position of China. As Martin Hutchinson (2013) points out:

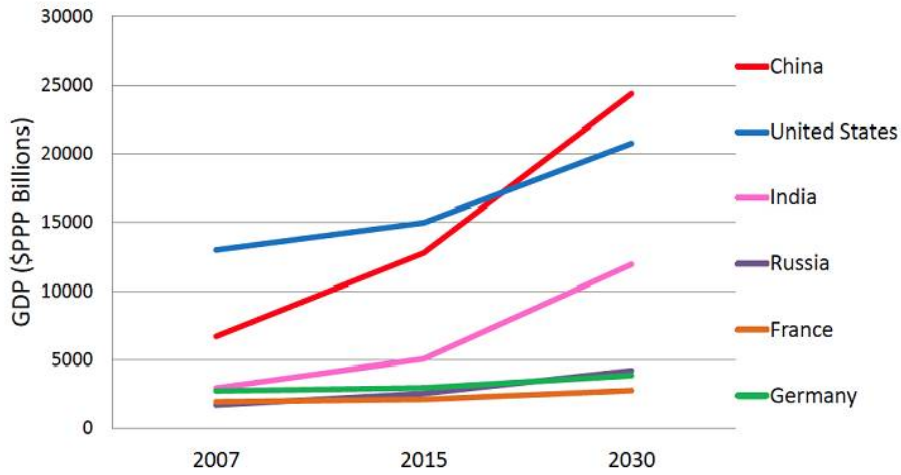
“ (...) though it only achieved that position [hegemony] for several hundred years by being deliberately geographically obtuse (...) about 200 years of her history China has been military dominant over all powers it felt it had to deal with”. (Hutchinson, 2013, section 3)

Obviously, this was a long time ago, but still worthy to note. Due to several 'pull' factors China now has the potential to recapture its position as a hegemon.

Key 'pull' factors include the continual growth of China's economic, military and therefore political capabilities, but also the broader and much-discussed shift of global economic power in the early twenty-first century from North America and Western Europe to Asia (Turner, 2014, p. 223). Between 1973 and 2010, Asia's share of global trade doubled, to over 30%.

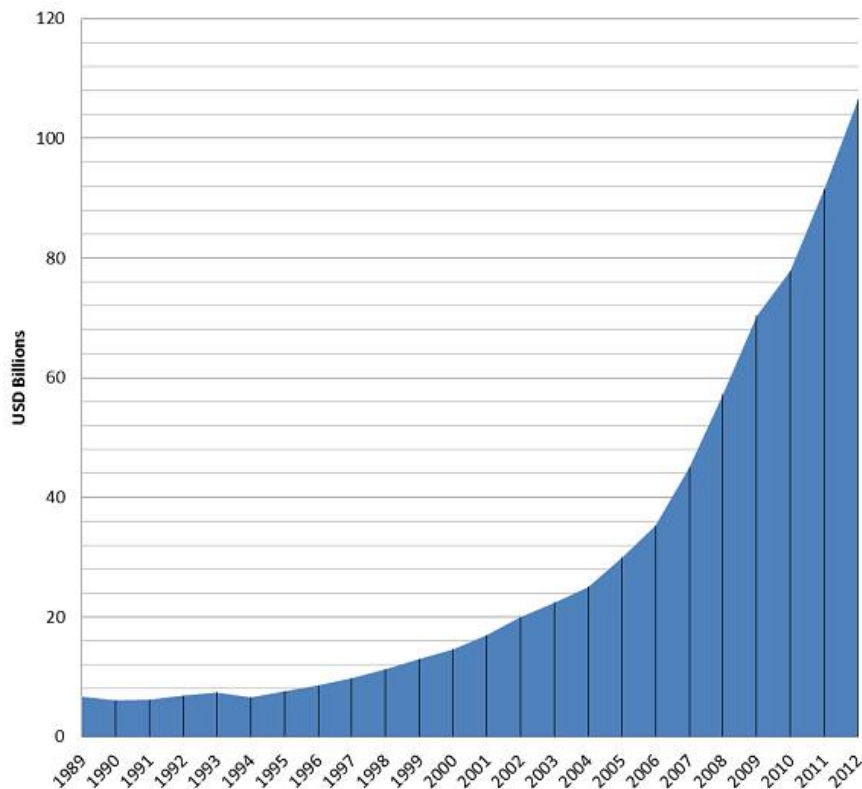
First of all, China has experienced a tremendous economic growth. This is in stark contrast with the United States, which has experienced a heavy economic recession since the financial crisis starting in 2007. China has now overtaken the US as the world's largest exporter (WTO, 2010, International Trade Statistics, Chapter 2) and its economy is expected to become the world's largest somewhere in the near future. As Figure 1 shows, China's GDP has increasingly grown and it is not expected to decline anywhere in the near future. Indeed, to many the question no longer is if, but when China will overtake the United States as the largest economy in the world.

**Figure 1. China's growth projection 2007-2030**  
 Source: International Energy Agency (IEA) (2009)



In line with offensive realism, rising wealth facilitates more military capabilities and therefore more power. Indeed China is leading the world's currently largest military build-up. As Figure 2 shows, China's military budget has tremendously increased over the past years.

**Figure 2. China's published military budget from 1989-2012**  
 Source: Global Security (2012)



According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and as shown in Table 1, China is ranked second among the fifteen biggest spenders on defense for 2013. While its budget might not look impressive comparing to the US budget, Figure 3 shows that, in present terms, China’s defense spending is expected to overtake America’s after 2035.

**Table 1. Top 15 of the biggest military spenders in the world by 2013**

Source: SIPRI (2012)

Rank		Country	Spending, 2013 (\$ b.)	Change, 2004-13 (%)	Spending as a share of GDP (%) <sup>a</sup>	
2013	2012				2013	2004
1	1	USA	640	12	3.8	3.9
2	2	China	[188]	170	[2.0]	[2.1]
3	3	Russia	[87.8]	108	[4.1]	[3.5]
4	7	Saudi Arabia	67.0	118	9.3	8.1
5	4	France	61.2	-6.4	2.2	2.6
6	6	UK	57.9	-2.5	2.3	2.4
7	9	Germany	48.8	3.8	1.4	1.4
8	5	Japan	48.6	-0.2	1.0	1.0
9	8	India	47.4	45	2.5	2.8
10	12	South Korea	33.9	42	2.8	2.5
11	11	Italy	32.7	-26	1.6	2.0
12	10	Brazil	31.5	48	1.4	1.5
13	13	Australia	24.0	19	1.6	1.8
14	16	Turkey	19.1	13	2.3	2.8
15	15	UAE <sup>b</sup>	[19.0]	85	4.7	4.7
<b>Total top 15</b>			<b>1 408</b>			
<b>World total</b>			<b>1 747</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>2.4</b>

**Figure 3. China’s future defense spending compared to the US**

Sources: SIPRI (2012)



SIPRI mentions that:

“The oft-repeated truism that its [China’s] military spending remains dwarfed by that of the United States is now countered with reference to Beijing’s annual defense budget which is now equal to those of the UK and Russia Combined”. (SIPRI 2012)

China’s military build-up and increasing defense budget are important because power is defined in military terms. So China’s military build-up equals an increase of its power. As Figure 3 has shown, it is predicted that China’s future military spending will increase more with respect to the future military spending of the United States. So China is and will be

consistently be able to maximize its power, which, due to the zero-sum element, automatically means that the United States will lose power. Therefore, China can be described as a potential hegemon.

According to offensive realism, every state is a power maximizing revisionist with the ultimate goal of achieving hegemony. A 'rising' China can therefore be viewed as a catalyst for instability or even conflict in the Asian region. This view is supported by China's frequently assertive and self-conscious behavior regarding its contested claims in the South and East China Seas. At the 2010 ASEAN Conference in Hanoi, China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said, in response to the complaints of US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton on freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, stated that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact<sup>3</sup>". He also called the US and Asian complaints about China's behavior in the region an "attack on China" (Yan Jiechi, 2010, ASEAN).

So it becomes clear that China represents a long-term policy of increasing military spending. The US on the other hand faces the challenges of its economic decline and budget cuts. I will discuss the impacts of US budget cuts later on. While the United States is still the biggest military spender by far, it must be concluded that China's military power is rising and therefore China is a potential hegemon that is able challenge the United States and shift power relations. With this in mind, it is expected that the United States will try to maximize its power over China and at the same will try to contain China's rise. Indeed, It is not a coincidence that the American plans to maintain and strengthen US military presence in the Asia-Pacific region comes in the midst of a large expansion of China's military. With all this in mind, the assertion that the "Asia Pacific has become a key driver of global politics" (Clinton, 2011), seems to be understatement.

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<sup>3</sup> On Monday, Yang issued a statement on the Foreign Ministry's Web site saying that there was no need to internationalize the issue, that China was still intent on solving all of the disputes bilaterally and that China's view represented the interests of "fellow Asians."

## **6. The US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region: liberal rhetoric, realist interpretation**

Now China has been identified as a potential hegemon, I will turn to examining the pivot more in detail.

The US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region has been introduced by president Barack Obama in November 2011. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was the first to officially explain the content and specific elements of this shift in foreign policy focus:

“It is a strategic course set by President Barack Obama from the outset of his administration to sustain our [US] leadership, secure our [US] interests, and advance our [US] values (...) A strategic turn to the region fits logically into our overall global effort to secure and sustain America's global leadership. Our work will proceed along six key lines of action: strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening America's relationships with rising powers, including China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights”. (Clinton 2011, section 10)

At first glance, this explanation suggests a liberal approach, rather than a realist one. This would not be surprising since Obama is the most leftist president America has ever elected. Obama came to office promising to repudiate the policies of his realist predecessor (George W. Bush). Indeed all policy statements of his administration suggested a largely liberal internationalist approach, while Obama's policy advisors constitute a “mixture of political realists and liberal internationalists” (McCormick, 2009, p. 145). Obama should indeed be a tough case for offensive realism. However, in line with Thayer, I argue that despite Obama's initial rhetoric, a tour along the horizon of the pivot reveals that his administration is purely a realist one:

“President Barack Obama is no different. Every new president comes to office pledging to break with the past and to conduct international politics with principle and morality. Each administration claims that it will bring new ideas to international politics and will not only break with the failed policies of its predecessor but will also lead the United States and the world to a new, brighter future while solving the

problems the country faces and reducing dangers. Such idealism is not limited to presidents. (...) At every inaugural and among the punditry pontificating in the colorful magazines, it seems no one is a realist as in the past. (...) At least no politician or commentator is a realist in his rhetoric. Yet, once the glow and honeyed words of the inauguration are past and the administration actually has to advance America's interests, the mask slips in deeds if not in rhetoric and realism is reborn. In fact, it never went away". (Thayer, 2010, p. 3)

Indeed, while Clinton used liberal words to describe the actions along which the pivot proceeds, the core message of the rebalancing policy is that America to going to play a leadership role in Asia for the decades to come (Lieberthal, 2011, p. 2). However, it would have been better if Clinton replaced expressions of the words 'can' and 'sustain' and 'going' by the word 'wants'. Indeed, the United States, wants to play a leadership role. It wants to sustain its leadership. The Whitehouse seems convinced that it can reach its objectives. However, as I explained in the previous chapter, it is more likely that China will become more powerful than the United States in economic and military terms. By highlighting its aim for leadership, the pivot automatically means that the United States is confronting China, since the term leadership is zero-sum. Due to its tremendous economic growth and currently the world's largest military build-up, China is the only country that can counter US leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. As said before in the previous chapter, it is not a coincidence that the American plans to maintain and strengthen US military presence in the Asia-Pacific region comes in the midst of a large expansion of China's military.

## **7. Maximizing wealth**

According to offensive realism, wealth provides for military capabilities. Therefore a great power will try to maximize its wealth. Mearsheimer also mentions that great powers also try to prevent great rival powers from dominating the wealth-generating areas of the world (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 45). As I already mentioned in the previous chapter, wealth is not only an instrument for the pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region, but also a cause.



Responding to China's booming economy and as the US financial crisis subsides, the Obama administration is increasingly promoting US trade, investment and technology across Asia. This economic dimension of the pivot allowed the United States to re-engage substantively with ASEAN, successfully negotiate a free trade agreement with South Korea, and to promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The most important tool for the US to maximize its wealth and at the same time contain China's wealth is the TPP. The TPP can be seen as a:

“ (...) trade and investment platform based around WTO's plus standards in areas such as the intellectual property, environmental protection, and labor rights. The TPP therefore presented not merely an offer to regional states, but a challenge to China's trade priorities”. (Kitchen, 2014, p. 88)

The TPP is currently being negotiated by the United States and eleven other countries<sup>4</sup> throughout the Asia-Pacific region. China is not among the initial partners negotiating to establish the TPP. President Obama noted that all who “accept its principles will be welcome to join” (Obama, 2011). However, the TPP principles of transparency, labor rights, protection of intellectual property and so forth, differs greatly from most Chinese actions in economics and trade. Therefore, negotiating a TPP can be viewed as a tool to prevent China from dominating wealth-generating areas. Establishing the TPP is therefore one of the primary goals of the Obama administration's efforts to maximize the wealth of the United States and at the same time contain China's wealth maximization.

China on the other hand also has established several regional agreements concerning trade which excluded the United States, most notably the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). However, this zone rather poses military implications to the United States, as it requires all foreign military activities under consent of the littoral state (Kitchen, 2014).

Indeed, the importance of US economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region has significant security and military implications. With an increasing volume of US import and export flowing in and out of the Pacific region, it has become critical that the United States maintains free navigation in the East and Chinese Seas, which will be discussed later on.

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<sup>4</sup> Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam

Economic wealth is important, as it facilitates military capabilities. In the next chapter, it becomes clear that the key aspect of the pivot therefore lies in the military sphere.

## **8. The military aspects of the Pivot: fearing the potential hegemon**

The most dramatic shift of the pivot lies in the military sphere (see for example Kitchen 2014; Lieberthal, 2012; Manyin et. all 2012) Following a trip by US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta in 2011, US president Barack Obama left no doubt that the American military and overall security focus was now shifting from Afghanistan and Iraq to Asia; and that this would be a long-term attitude that would remain one of the highest security priorities for the United States.

It should be noted that American military involvement in the Asia-Pacific region is not new. Indeed, as Joseph Gerson (2012) argues the pivot is best understood as “an extension of a century and a half of US foreign and military presence”. The United States has always retained significant military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. However, as I already discussed in chapter four, the Bush administration largely neglected the Asia Pacific region. With the pivot, the Obama administration has placed a type of emphasis on this part of the world which has been absent since the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 (Turner, 2014, p. 224).

The official Whitehouse document says that the United States wants to maintain and strengthen its military superiority (Defense Strategic Guidance , 2012). Again, this shows the United States is playing a zero-sum game: the only way to become superior is if you have more relative power than other states. So if you gain military superiority, it will always come at the expense of somebody else that will lose. So the question is at who's expense the United States wants to maintain and strengthen its military superiority. While the Whitehouse refrained from stating that the military steps of the pivot are aimed at any particular country, the Whitehouse and the Secretary of Defense jointly declared that:

“Over the long term, China’s emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the US economy and our [US] security in a variety of ways. However, the growth of China’s military power must be accompanied by greater clarity of its strategic intentions in order to reduce the risk of miscalculation and avoid causing friction in the region (...) We look to Beijing to overcome its reluctance at times and join us in forging a durable military-to-military dialogue (...) Accordingly, while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance our military towards the Asia-Pacific region”. (Clinton 2011; DSG 2012)

This statement perfectly summarizes the reason behind the new US military strategy in the Asia-Pacific region: the US fears the large build-up of China’s military power and the lack of information about how it might use its new forces and even who is really in the charge of them. Indeed, in November 2011 former US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta confirmed this fear by claiming that the United States is threatened by ‘rising powers’ such as China (Panetta, 2011, US Department of Defense). In offensive realist terms, here we clearly observe an expression of Mearsheimer’s theoretical assumption that states are possibly dangerous to each other, because they possess a certain military capability. In China’s case, these military capabilities are increasing. The United States (this also works the other way around for China) expresses its uncertain feelings about the intentions of China’s military build- up. What makes things even more alarming for the US is the lack over who really controls the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Formally, the PLA is not part of the state. This makes China unique among the great powers. As Richard Sisk (2014) formulates:

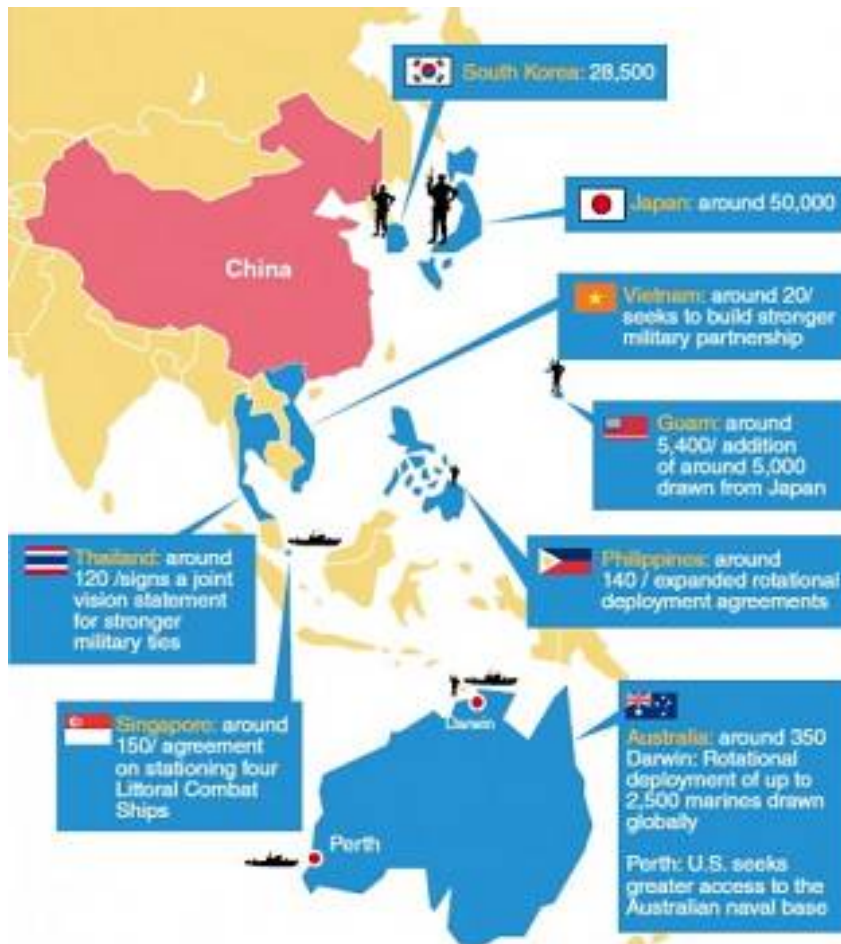
“It [the PLA] is responsible to the Communist Party, and is run by the party’s Central Military Commission, not the ministry of defense. Although party and government are obviously very close in China, the party is even more opaque, which complicates outsiders’ understanding of where the PLA’s loyalties and priorities lie”. (Sisk, 2014, section 5)

Even if China’s intentions are targeted against the United States, this doesn’t have to mean that China feels certain aggression to the United States, but simply that it wants to secure it

security and maximize its power, just like any other state. As Clinton already mentions herself, there is a high-risk of miscalculation in being unsure about China's intentions. However, it is to the very core of offensive realism that the overall underlying intention of China is to maximize its power, just as the United States did when achieving hegemony. China has the potential to achieve hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and it is clear that the United States doesn't like the idea of having a peer in its backyard. Therefore, the pivot is mainly, if not solely, about China (Koshy, 2013). Willy Lam points out that the new developments from the US side are about one thing: containing China's military rise and the tectonic shifts associated with it (Lam, 2012). Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton invigorated this view of America trying to defend its hegemonic status by pronouncing that "Rather than to pull back (...), we need to press forward and renew our leadership (...) We are prepared to lead" (Clinton, 2011, section 45). To combat the rising threat of China, the United States military will increase its institutional weight and focus on enhanced presences, power projection, and deterrence in the Asia Pacific (Turner, 2014, p. 223).

So the first new component of the new US military strategy is to enhance its presence in the Asia-Pacific region. During his visit to Australia in November 2011, US president Barack Obama signed an agreement to allow deployments up to 2500 marines in Darwin, the point in Australia which is closest to the South China Sea. The US has also deployed one combat ship to Singapore. In addition to the new US deployments in Australia and Singapore, US officials have announced that also the Philippines and Japan will host a greater number of US forces and equipment in the coming years. In 2012, in a speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said that the Pentagon, having adopted an Air-Sea battle concept, has committed to deploying 60 percent of its nuclear-armed and high-tech navy to the Asia-Pacific region. This involves six aircraft carriers, a majority of the Navy's cruisers, destroyers, littoral combat ships and submarines. These military capabilities will be reinforced by an increase in the number and size of military exercises in the Pacific and greater number of port visits. Figure 4 illustrates all US troop deployments under the new military strategy to the Asia-Pacific region.

Figure 4. US troop deployment under the pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region  
 Source: US Defense Department (2011)



What becomes clear from figure 4 is that all deployments find themselves along China's periphery. Figure 4 also illustrates a clear emphasis on navy rather than land-troops, which is in line with the Air-Sea doctrine and a strategy of buck-passing. China is surrounded by US military presence. Indeed, it is not surprising that China has long been suspicious of US intentions in the region. The US troop deployments are strategically stationed around both the South and East China Seas.

The rebalancing of military deployments is remarkable, since Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced several massive cuts in the defense budget. Skeptics within political and military circles, but also some of America's Asian allies argue that due to these budget restraints in the overall US military budget, there is reason to doubt that the US will be able to fully resource the pivot. Some even say that America's power projection capabilities are declining and the pivot therefore simply can't happen. On March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014 the assistant

secretary of defense, Katrina McFarland, said that “right now, the pivot is being looked at again, because candidly it can’t happen [due to budget pressures]”. Only to retract this statement later that day announcing (through a spokesperson) that:

“I was reiterating what Secretary Hagel said last week: the shift in focus to the Asia-Pacific requires us to ‘adapt, innovate, and make difficult budgetary and acquisition decisions to ensure that our military remains ready and capable. That’s exactly what we’ve done in this budget. The rebalance to Asia can and will continue”. (McFarland, 2014, press conference)

Indeed, the pivot can and will continue. As I already mentioned, the pivot is rather a rebalancing of forces, than planning a large and costly military build-up like China. Also, the United States puts more focus on the navy, air force and advanced technology so less land troops are needed. On top of that, the United States uses a strategy of buck-passing which allows the US to maintain influence at reduced costs. It must be noted however, that because buck-passing is disastrous in the long run, the costs may rise as the security competition intensifies. But even with the proposed \$500 billion reduction, the US would still “ (...) continue to spend more on defense each year in the next decade than it did during the height of the Cold War” (Dean, 2014). US officials made clear several times that the budget cuts will not come at the expense of US military activities in the Asia-Pacific region. During his speech in Canberra in 2011, president Obama said that due to strategic importance “reduction in US defense spending will not - I repeat, will not – come at the expense of the Asia Pacific” (Obama, 2011). So while the cuts in the overall defense budget poses a challenge to the United States, it will not come at the expense of the pivot.

## **9. Strengthening military alliances: the United States as an off-shore balancer**

Besides the identification of the Asia-Pacific region as a military top priority and rebalancing troop deployments throughout the region to contain China, another cornerstone of US military strategy is strengthening its alliances. In her article *The American Pacific Century*, Hillary Clinton made clear that the US military alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia,

the Philippines, and Thailand, will serve as “the fulcrum for our strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific” (Clinton, 2011).

By rotating its troops around China’s periphery, its emphasis on naval and air capabilities, and by strengthening alliances, the US acts like a typical offshore balancer: it passes the buck to the surrounding countries to contain China. At first, this might sound a bit odd since the United States seems very active in the region. However, instead of actively contain China itself the United States acts from a distance, trying to secure its interest from the sea and air by equipping China’s neighbors. It buttresses America’s naval presence in the Pacific and aid those nations on China’s periphery that also fear its hegemonic ambitions. Again, for an Obama administration that came into office talking about remaking the world’s institutional architecture to combat common threats like global warming and nuclear proliferation, offshore balancing seems a bit amoral and zero-sum, but as soon as the administration actually has to advance America’s interests, the masks of liberalism slips and its realist face is shown. Buck-passing is applied because it offers a way for the United States to maintain influence at reduced cost; However, it is not a concept for doing interventions on the cheap. It is a strategy for balancing in distant regions, without having to resort to direct intervention. The United States achieves this balance by making sure that China, as a potential hegemon, is kept in check through local competition. Indeed Layne (2012) points out that America’s offshore balancing is based on a common set of core strategic principles:

“First, offshore balancing is a strategy of burden shifting, not burden sharing. It is based on getting other states to do more for their security so the United States can do less. Second, fiscal and economic constraints require that the United States set strategic priorities, which means a downsize of its forces in the Middle East and a concentration of its military power in Asia along China’s periphery. Third, America’s comparative strategic advantages rest on naval and air power, not on sending land armies to fight ground wars”. (Layne, 2012, p. 2)

Indeed, Washington passes the test for acting as an offshore balancer: it transfers the responsibility (the buck) to countries along China’s periphery to beat back any Chinese bid for hegemony through local competition. The United States aids those countries where

necessary, but prefers to stay on the sidelines. Luckily for the United States, local competition in the Asia-Pacific region is very alive.

### **10. Local competition in the Asia-Pacific region**

While passing the buck to China's neighboring countries, the US, if the opportunity arises, will also very carefully and at low-profile employ a strategy what can be classified as a bait and bleed strategy. I will clarify this argument by using the example of Japan. The US pivot has a significant impact upon key local powers, but primarily on Japan, which is historically the main political and strategic partner of the US in the Asia-Pacific area. The United States committed itself by treaty to defend Japan. Therefore, Japan was able to behave as a 'security consumer', whose mere alignment with the US guaranteed security and stability. However, since the pivot, Japan is being increasingly forced by the US to rethink its role and enlarge its duties in the provision of security and deterrence in the area (Croning et. all , 2012). So the United States is increasingly passing the buck to Japan to check and deter potential Chinese hegemony. An advantage for the United States is that throughout the Asia-Pacific region, Japan has the most tense stand-off territorial dispute about what the Japanese call the Senkaku and the Chinese the Diaoyu islands located in the South China Sea. The US uses this situation in its advantage to carefully square off Japan and China over the disputed islands. The United States does so by openly encouraging Japan in its claims. As a result, Japan, feeling strengthened by the United States, takes a more active stance against China, which results in an intensifying attrition between China and Japan. Indeed, general Fang Fenghui, chief of the general staff of the PLA, argued that the US pivot to the Asia-Pacific was encouraging unrest in the region: "The rebalancing strategy of the U.S. has stirred up some of the problems which make the South China Sea and the East China Set not so calm as before" (Fenghui, 2014, press conference). Fenghui also said that the Japanese claims were also encouraged by the US rebalance of forces. So besides acting as an offshore balancer, the US also carefully employs a strategy of bait and bleed when the opportunity arises. In this way, the US can remain on the sidelines and maintain its military and economic strength.



Besides Japan, China is also involved in several territorial disputes with Vietnam, Malaysia, South-Korea and the Philippines about resource rich island in the South and East China Seas.

The Philippines has a long-lasting dispute with China over the so-called Spratley and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. In 2012, Philippine Senator Richard J. Gordon expressed concerns about China's development and argued that stronger US-Philippine security ties are necessary: "The United States has been losing ground in this [Asia-Pacific] region (...) You have a China that is beginning to flex its muscles, and it is pushing around us (...) We need to have a firemen nearby" (Singapore Institute of International Affairs, 2012). So The Philippines already stated that it wants to keep China's regional interests in check. It signed a new military agreement with the United States that allowed rotational presences of US troops and equipment. However, the details have yet to be worked out. US officials are still deliberately vague about its content. Indeed, the United States has kept the Filipino in the dark. The only thing the United States seems to do is training Filipino soldiers, so if it comes to an armed conflict, the Philippines can fight the war in its place . Again, the United States is acting as an offshore balancer by passing the buck to the Philippines (Francisco and Spetalnick, 2014).

Another example of the United States employing both a buck-passing and bait and bleed strategy is Taiwan. The territorial disputes between Taiwan and China are not about islands in the East and South Chinese Seas, but about Taiwan itself. China considers self-ruled Taiwan as a breakaway province which has to return to mainland China, by force if necessary. Therefore, Taiwan has always been suspicious about China and is following its recent military developments with fear. The United States has been supplying arms to Taiwan since 1979 in order to create a "sufficient self-defense capability [against China]" . With the pivot, the US is increasing its arms sale to Taiwan and continues to ensure that it will provide Taiwan with advanced military equipment, despite the consistent criticism of China. In May 2012, the US House of representatives voted in favor of selling the Taiwan government 66 new fighter aircrafts (Turner, 2014). Again, the United States is passing the buck to Taiwan. It aids Taiwan with arms, but leaves then leaves it with the responsibility to contain China. China openly opposes US arms sale to Taiwan. At a monthly briefing in March 2014, Geng Yansheng, a Chinese defense ministry spokesman, urged the United States to

stop selling arms to Taiwan and respect China's "core interests". "China opposes any country's arms sale to Taiwan. The stance is resolute, consistent and clear", he continued. He also warned that "arms sale to Taiwan will disturb the major power relations being forged by China and the US" (Yansheng, 2014). However, general Sampson Lee, who heads the military mission of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in Washington, said that Taiwan would seek to go on buying defensive systems to meet "persistent military threats". So basically, this is an ideal situation for Washington, since Taiwan and China square off each other mostly by themselves. Taiwan is asking for US arms, knowing that it will intensify its conflict with China. The US is of course very willing to respond to Taiwan's demand by supplying the requested arms. The United States can remain at the sidelines, acting as an offshore balancer and dividing China's attention to local competition conflicts.

### **11. The down-side of buck-passing and bait and bleed strategies: intensifying security competition**

It becomes clear that China's territorial claims is one part of its push for power maximization of the surrounding areas, but it is also a crucial part of the growing contest for influence with the United States (Dyer, 2014). Indeed, China is aware of the US's attempts to gain influence in the Asia-Pacific region and to contain China. Indeed, in addition to the statement of general Fang Fenghui of the PLA, arguing that the pivot to the Pacific was encouraging unrest in the region, he stated that "This is something we can never agree upon" (Fenghui, 2014, press conference).

Indeed, Mearsheimer already argued that "buck-passing is effective in the short turn, but disastrous in the long run" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 35). Beijing has openly argued that it opposes Washington's buck-passing strategy. In a speech during a gala dinner before the fourth Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit in May 2014, Chinese president Xi Jinping, warned Asian nations about strengthening military alliances to counter China. While he did not mention specific countries, it is clear that he warned Asian nations for serving as buck-catchers for the United States. The buck-

passing strategy only intensifies the security competition between China and the United States.

China has reacted to the US pivot by increasing its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) defined anti-access as enemy actions that are intended to inhibit military movement into a foreign theater of operations. So it is intended to exclude US forces from Chinese territory. In military terms, A2 capabilities are translated into denial of basing, staging, transit or over-flight rights, but also more lethal capabilities like ballistic missiles, submarines, and weapons of mass destruction. So more broadly, A2 capabilities are an actively attempt to deny the United States the broad political and economic influence it has long enjoyed (Freier, 2012). Area-denial (AD) is defined as activities that seek to deny freedom of action within areas under the enemy's control (CSBA 2012). They present the most prolific barriers to effective theater entry and operation. The overall goals of A2/AD is to challenge US access and freedom to operate in China territory. However, the fact that China is involved in several territorial disputes about resource rich islands makes the A2/AD challenge even greater. For example, in November 2013, China announced new air traffic restrictions through the East Chinese Sea by launching an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). The ADIZ included islands claimed by Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. So Chinese A2/AD capabilities might also challenge US access to those regions. As I already mentioned the Chinese Seas are vital for US economy, since a lot of US trade passes through this waters.

According to Dennis Blair, the former pacific commander who was head of the US intelligence service early in the Obama administration "ninety percent of their [China] time is spent on thinking about new and interesting ways to sink our [US] ships and shoot down our [US] planes" (Blair,2014 ).

China is projecting its increasing A2/AD capabilities throughout the Asian seas, to gain more power over the Asian region and at the same trying to push the US out. The United States did the same when achieving hegemony in the Western hemisphere. From an offensive realist view, increasing A2/AD capabilities is very logical.

For the US, in order to deter potential opponents like China and to prevent them from achieving their objectives, it is necessary to maintain its ability to project power in A2/AD areas. As The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) formulates:

“Sophisticated adversaries will use asymmetric capabilities, to include electronic and cyber warfare, ballistic and cruise missiles, advanced air defenses, mining and other methods, to complicate our operational calculus. States such as China (...) will continue to pursue asymmetric means to counter our power projection capabilities (...) Accordingly, the US military will invest as required to ensure its ability to operate effectively in anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) environments. This will include implementing the Joint Operational Access Concept, sustaining our undersea capabilities, developing a new stealth bomber, improving missile defenses, and continuing efforts to enhance the resiliency and effectiveness of critical space-based capabilities”. (QDR, 2014)

In order to conduct successful military operations in the A2/AD environment, US leadership must address A2/AD as a new way of war.

The US addressed A2/AD as a new way of war in the form of an Air Sea Battle (ASB) concept. This concept The QDR stated that: “the Air Force and Navy together are developing a new joint air-sea battle concept for defeating adversaries across the range of military operations, including adversaries equipped with sophisticated anti-access and area denial capabilities”. The ASB is the successor of the Air Land Battle (ALB), which was “developed in the 1970s and 1980s to counter a Soviet Union attack in Europe” (ASB, 2013, Department of Defense). The DoD document further states that the ASB concept is:

“Similarly designed to attack-in-depth, but instead of focusing on the land domain from the air, the concept described integrated operations across all five domains [air, land, sea, space and cyberspace] to create advantage. The ASB concept further differentiates itself from its predecessor in that the ASB concept also strives to protect our rear echelon across the same domains. This defensive aspect of ASB helps the Joint Force reduce risk in the face of increasingly longer range and more precise weapons”. (ASB, 2013)

So in fact, the pivot strategy announces the beginning of a new Cold War “If US’s enemy in Europe was the Soviet Union, in the Asia-Pacific it is China” (Koshy , 2013). As General Martin Dempsey Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff put it, “the US military will be obliged to overtly confront China as it faced down the Soviet Union”. Implicitly, the pivot is a long drawn out cold war between the US and China which promises to be more intense in strategic brinkmanship than the earlier cold war between the West and the Soviet Union and its allies (Koshy, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

This thesis provided an extensive research on the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region. As China’s power is rising and that of the US is declining, a power transition will likely take place. Disillusionment with the purpose, cost and efficacy of the ‘global war on terror’ and simultaneously the consistent growth of China’s economic, military and therefore political capabilities which gives China the potential to challenge US global hegemony resulted in a new direction of US foreign policy. In November 2011, president Barack Obama announced a ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalancing’ towards the Asia-Pacific region. While the official rhetoric of this rebalancing policy might sound like hearing a liberal lecture, it becomes clear that its intentions and actions are consistent with offensive realism. China is an example of the offensive realist concept of potential hegemony. Indeed, the question is no longer if, but when China will overtake the United States position as largest economy and biggest defense spender in the world. The United States fears the intentions of China and therefore introduced a new military strategy to the Asia-Pacific region, to contain China. Key aspects of this military rebalancing are strategies of buck-passing and, when the opportunity arises, very carefully bully around at bit to square off local powers, most notably China and Japan. However, while these strategies are effective in the short run, they are disastrous in the long run. While the US prefers remaining on the sidelines, China’s increasing A2/AD capabilities poses new challenges to the US. In response, the United States of America had adopted the A2/AD as an important element of its grand strategy. This is a return to old fashioned Cold War politics. Indeed, a new Cold War is rising. Due to its focus to high technology like the use

of drones and long range weapons it might be less visible than the Cold War between the United States and Russia, but it promises to be more intense in strategic brinkmanship.

In the beginning of this research I formulated the following research question:

*To what extent does the strategic US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region reflect US power maximizing interests towards China?*

After an extensive case study analyzing the US pivot towards the Asia Pacific it becomes clear that the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region reflects significant power maximizing interests towards China. First of all, China is the only potential hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. Second, the United States tries to maximize its wealth by negotiating a Trans Pacific Partnership that excludes China so far. Third, it tries to expand its military capabilities along China's periphery. Fourth, the United States is acting as an offshore balancer towards China. And finally, the US is carefully employing a bait and bleed strategy against China. This shows that the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region is mainly about China. The strategies used within the pivot are both meant to gain power over China but also to prevent China from gaining power at the expense of the United States. Every aspect of the US pivot is directly or indirectly linked to China. The Obama administration passes the test of acting according to offensive realism. As expected, all three hypotheses will be adopted. This high degree of US power maximizing interests towards China allows me to conclude that the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific is just a semblance of the truth. The US hides its true character behind a mask of liberal rhetoric, which only serves as a disguise of its power maximizing interests towards China. Indirectly, this attitude is causing a new Cold War.

However, as with every research, this case study has a few limitations. First of all, the entire analysis is based on the assumption that China will continue to grow. I have provided clear arguments that there is fair reason to believe this. However, one can never be sure since it is a prediction about the future. There might always arise unexpected circumstances which might request a change in these predictions. However, with all things equal, China will very likely continue to rise.

Another limitation might be ignoring the fact that due to urgent happenings elsewhere in the world, the United States possibly has to rewrite its policy. Indeed, while the wars in

Afghanistan and Iraq are officially ended, the Middle East still requests the attention of the United States. Also recent events in Russia and Ukraine might have an impact on the performance of the pivot. That is the burden a global hegemon carries.

Time will tell whether the United States will be able to continue to carry out its Asia-Pacific policy as it likes. Further research should therefore be conducted and extended.

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