

21st Century U.S. Policy on an Emergent China: From Strategic Constraint to Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific Region

*Renato Cruz De Castro**

International Studies Department
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

Abstract

During his second term as U.S. president, former President Barack Obama made the Asia-Pacific region the focal point of American strategic attention. In November 2011, he announced the U.S. pivot to Asia. His goal was to constrain China from easing out the U.S. as East Asia's strategic offshore balancer. Contrary to expectations, the 2016 election of Donald Trump, did not spell the end of the strategic rebalancing to Asia. For the Trump Administration, the Asia-Pacific remains a top security priority because of China's naval expansion, island-building activities, and militarization efforts in the South China Sea threaten not only the freedom of navigation but also the rules-based international order. Consequently, the Trump Administration has directed the U.S. military to proceed with the rebalancing of its forces and their capabilities to the Asia-Pacific region. This decision indicates that, despite its initial opposition to the rebalancing policy to Asia, the current administration believes that on the basis of geography, interests and values, the U.S. is a Pacific power which plays an important role in shaping the future of this dynamic region. This is because the Trump Administration has engaged China in a strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region. In conclusion, this article warns that the Trump Administration's policy of engaging China in a strategic competition will set back the hands of time to the U.S.-Sino conflict in the early years of the Cold War, when American and Chinese values, interests and policies were simply adversarial without any convergence. However, this 21st Sino-U.S. competition is different because both countries' materiel/technological capabilities and global reach are considerably greater than they were in the 1950s.

Keywords: *Indo-Pacific region, Sino-U.S. competition, Trump Administration, China, constraint, rebalancing policy, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*

1. Introduction

On November 11, 2016, speaking before the Australian Parliament in Canberra, apropos American presence in Asia, then President Barack Obama said: “Reduction in U.S. spending will not – I repeat, will not – come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific. We will preserve our unique ability to project power and preserve peace (in East Asia).¹ He affirmed that maintaining U.S. forward-deployed forces in the Asia-Pacific remained his top priority despite cuts in U.S. defence spending. Thus, former President Obama made the Asia-Pacific region the focal point of U.S. strategic and diplomatic attention during his second four-year term. He built up American forward-deployed forces in the Western Pacific, strengthened his country’s bilateral alliances, forged new security partnerships with a number of East Asian states, and boosted U.S. participation in regional organizations. His overarching goal was to constrain China from easing out the U.S. as East Asia’s strategic offshore balancer.

The 2016 election of Donald Trump, however, did not spell the end of the strategic rebalancing to Asia at all. The Asia-Pacific remains a top security priority for the U.S. for two reasons: First, North Korea’s nuclear weapons program poses a clear and present danger to the U.S. and its Northeast Asian allies. And more significantly, China’s naval build-up and island-building activities and militarization of the South China Sea threaten not only the freedom of navigation but also the rules-based international order. Consequently, the Trump Administration has directed the U.S. military to proceed with the rebalancing of its forces and their capabilities to the Asia-Pacific region. These developments indicate that despite its initial opposition to the Obama Administration’s rebalancing policy to Asia, the current administration realizes that on the basis of geography, interests and values, the U.S. is a Pacific power which plays an important role in shaping the future of this dynamic region.

The Trump Administration’s foreign policy on the Indo-Pacific region reflects both continuity as well as discontinuity with the Obama Administration’s rebalancing strategy. On the one hand, the Trump Administration’s policy towards Asia reflects continuity as high-ranking administration officials visited the region and with President Trump receiving the leaders of Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam at the White House. These were carefully calibrated policies taken by the current administration to send a reassuring signal that U.S. engagement with the region would be built upon the foundation laid down by the Obama Administration.² This stance stems from an appreciation and understanding of the U.S. role and function to strengthen American alliances, partnerships, and regional institutions that are committed to a rules-based international order as the foundation of peace and stability in East Asia.³ It is also based on the realization that China continues to challenge American leadership in the Indo-Pacific.

On the other hand, the Trump Administration foreign policy also reflects discontinuity as it characterized China as a threat to U.S. interests and is aimed to engage this emergent power in a strategic competition. The new *U.S. National Security Strategy* labelled China and Russia as revisionist powers and rivals of the U.S. that are seeking to erode U.S. security and prosperity.⁴ It accused China of expanding its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others and spreading its authoritarian system around the world. Accordingly, in the Indo-Pacific region, the document asserts that China aims to displace the U.S. as the dominant power.⁵ By labelling it as a strategic competitor, the Trump Administration has discounted any possibility that China will evolve as a “responsible stakeholder” or a “normal great power.” Alarmed by its broadening and deepening economic, diplomatic and strategic efforts aimed to ease the U.S. out of the Indo-Pacific region, the Trump Administration is pushing back against China fully aware that the U.S. still possesses substantial military and economic capabilities that are far greater than this emergent and assertive power.

This article explores the changes in the Trump Administration’s foreign policy in the light of the commonsensical view that it is simply continuing the Obama Administration’s strategic rebalancing to East Asia. It raises this main question: Is the Trump Administration pursuing a policy of continuity or discontinuity of its predecessor’s strategic rebalancing to the region? It also addresses these corollary questions: A) what is the strategic rebalancing policy to Asia all about? B) What are its components? C) How did the Obama Administration implement this policy? D) How does the Trump Administration view this policy? E) is there any change or modification in the Trump Administration’s foreign policy on the China on particular, and on the Indo-Pacific region in general? and F) what will be the implication of this change in U.S. foreign policy on the Indo-Pacific region?

2. From a Responsible Stakeholder to a Strategic Competitor

Contemporary realist literature portrays an anarchic world where *status quo* states have two choices in responding to an emergent and revisionist power like China. Accordingly, some states balance the emergent and revisionist power to preserve their security, while others jump on the bandwagon to secure economic gains or otherwise expand their influence.⁶ In his 1987 classic work, *The Origin of Alliances*, Stephen Walt observed that when confronted by a major external security challenge, a state may either balance by allying itself with other states against the potential threat or get on the bandwagon by aligning itself with the emergent power.⁷

However, there is a third approach – constraint. The late Canadian scholar Gerald Segal explored the application of constraint on a potentially

revisionist China in his 1996 article, “East Asia and the ‘Constraint’ of China”.⁸ He argued that containment (a form of balancing) and engagement (a form of bandwagoning) are artifacts of the Cold War and could not resolve the problems attendant to an emergent China. In other words, both strategies have become anachronistic in the post-Cold War era. Alternatively, he called for a balanced policy of engagement with a modified form of containment which he called “constraint.” This term is concretely demonstrated in the collective action of states that coalesce to pressure China to moderate its stance on certain issues.⁹ Segal recognized the advantages of deepening the economic, social and political relations with China. Nevertheless, he cautioned western countries and ASEAN member states that such engagements would be optimized only if China could be prevented from using force to realize its irredentist claims and to tilt the balance of power in East Asia in its favour.¹⁰

There is a need to engage an emergent power like China, yet the international community must not hesitate to constrain it when necessary. Segal warned about the tendency of some states to indulge or pander to China’s whims so as not to offend the sensibilities of the Chinese people especially in what is perceived as an attempt to contain China.¹¹ He also noted that China fears a concert of countervailing forces. Thus, it has softened or modified its position on contentious issues in the ASEAN Regional Forum, and has even signed the Non-Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the Comprehensive Ban Treaty (CBT). Constraint need not be a confrontational or a balancing policy against China. Rather, it must aim to integrate China into the international system.¹²

During the Cold War, the U.S. adopted on a grand strategy of containment by applying economic, military and diplomatic means to contain communism in countries where it ruled and to prevent its spread to other parts of the world. Today, containment is no longer adequate to deal with a generally pragmatic (not ideological), diplomatically astute, economically powerful, but unstable and minimal *status quo* power like China. Rebalancing, nonetheless, is not containment as it does not treat China as a Cold War-style opponent but rather as a potential adversary. The China challenge must be approached from a position of strength and given clear red lines relative to any potential trouble spot, from the Korean Peninsula to the Taiwan Straits, and the South China Sea.¹³

As an American grand strategy in the second decade of the 21st century, the rebalancing policy aims to constrain China’s pervasive influence and power in East Asia. The Obama administration’s strategic pivot to Asia expands rather than transforms U.S. defence policy in Asia since 1945 – which is the maintenance of forward-deployed forces to guarantee America’s involvement in significant regional developments.¹⁴ In March 2012, a U.S. Congressional Research Service Report indicated that the “the

Administration's increased emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region appears to be more of a change in means than a change in policy goals ... underlying much of the Obama policy is the long-standing challenge of managing tension in Sino-U.S. relations while seeking to deepen China's integration into the international community."¹⁵

The rebalancing strategy is concerned with the constraintment of China. It involves a group of states defending their collective interests and threatened by China, which has become increasingly powerful and assertive. Currently, this diplomatic strategy is backed up by American military power to make it effective given China's success in preventing the coalition of states that have staked their respective claims in the South China Sea. In concrete terms, the rebalancing necessitates building-up the capacity of the U.S., and its allies to constrain China from using its naval prowess and diplomatic clout to alter the existing distribution of power and influence globally, especially in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁶ A key element is the formation of a major coalition of states to counter China's unrestrained and aggressive moves in the region.¹⁷

The strategic rebalancing policy addresses two broad problems generated by China's emergence as a major power in East Asia:¹⁸ namely: 1) how to deter Chinese destabilizing efforts in East Asia; and 2) how to encourage China to contribute to multilateral global governance particularly in preventing nuclear proliferation, climate change and international financial instability. A 2013 study of the strategic rebalancing to Asia noted: "...U.S. policy would focus on strengthening security relations with key allies and others while treating Beijing as an occasional collaborator in addressing regional and global problems, especially in the economic sphere."¹⁹

The Trump Administration, however, has altered the Obama Administration's constraintment policy on China by treating it a strategic competitor rather than a responsible stakeholder. During the Obama Administration, the strategic rebalancing policy was implemented as a multifaceted strategy that incorporated elements that were aimed to prevent China from altering the *status quo* (constraintment or stick strategy), but at the same time to foster diplomatic and economic interactions (engagement or carrot policy) with China in order to avoid a major strategic rivalry with this emergent power.²⁰ It was also aimed to maintain the balance of power by assuring allies of American strategic presence in the region through the general improvement of U.S. power projection capabilities in the Western Pacific. The rebalancing policy accepted the possibility of American leadership in the Asia-Pacific region that will be maintained by a multi-dimensional, less confrontational and above all, more balanced multinational power sharing with responsible stakeholders like Japan, India and China.²¹

The Trump Administration, however, has discarded this concept of power-sharing with China. This is because it saw China's expanding com-

prehensive capabilities in terms of: a) undermining America's role as the off-shore strategic balancer in the Asia-Pacific region; b) exacerbating old territorial disputes, and contested historical issues; and c) flaunting to Washington that unchallenged U.S. military dominance in the region is about to end because of China's emergence as a great power in East Asia. For the Trump Administration, maintaining American primacy in the Indo-Pacific region requires doing away with any delusion of integrating China into the liberal world order. This is because it sees China's actions and goals as the major destabilizing element in the Indo-Pacific region. This leaves the U.S. no choice but to compete, deter and win in this competitive environment.²²

The Trump Administration replaced its predecessor's carrot and stick approach with an outright balancing strategy that involves: a) challenging China's assertive behaviour as an emergent power in the Indo-Pacific region; b) maintaining the regional balance of power that tilts towards the U.S.; c) supporting countries that have competing territorial claims with Beijing as a means of confronting the geostrategic challenge poised by a more assertive and powerful China; and d) preparing a strategic response to defeat China's growing anti-access and area-denial (A2/A2) capabilities. Consequently, it has put the U.S. in a head-long and protracted comprehensive competition for power and influence with China in the Indo-Pacific region.²³

America's strategy is to manoeuvre this competitor into an unfavourable position, frustrate its efforts, preclude its options while expanding the U.S.', and forcing it to confront the possibility of military conflict under adverse conditions.²⁴ The Trump Administration's policy of engaging China in a strategic competition will set back the hands of time to the U.S.-Sino conflict in the early years of the Cold War, when American and Chinese values, interests and policies were simply adversarial without any convergence. However, this 21st Sino-U.S. competition is different because both countries' materiel/technological capabilities and global reach are considerably greater than they were in the 1950s.

3. From Strategic Pivot to Rebalancing

The U.S. pivot to Asia was announced at the time when China loomed large because of its naval build-up and aggressiveness in the South China Sea. Since 2010, the South China Sea has become a strategic bone of contention between the U.S. and China. The stretch of maritime territory from the Yellow Sea through the East China Sea, and down to the Strait of Taiwan towards the South China Sea is part of the first-island-chain that forms the front line of China's naval defences. By dominating these waters, China expands its security perimeter and reinforces its influence over these crucial sea lines of

communication (SLOC) linking the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. China's objective is to project its naval power into the far seas or the maritime areas adjacent to the outer rims of the first-island-chain that includes Japan, Ryuku Islands, Taiwan and the Philippines and extends to the cold waters of the north Pacific.

The projection of Chinese naval power in these maritime areas will enable the People's Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN) to respond rapidly to diverse threats originating from the far seas. The PLAN can also protect China's economic interests in transiting through the far seas, and to dissuade potential adversaries operating in the far seas from intervening in contingencies involving the country.²⁵ Moreover, China's extensive economic links with its neighbours, which are militarily weak vis-à-vis the People Liberation Army (PLA), and its participation in several regional forums make an outright balancing or containment policy an expensive and difficult U.S. grand strategy for the region.²⁶

The bottom line of the strategic rebalancing was articulated by former President Obama during the 2016 ASEAN summit in Laos: "Our position is stronger and sends a clear message that as a Pacific nation we're here to stay."²⁷ Accordingly, this pronouncement was predicated on three important features of the policy: a) strengthened American military posture as the fundamental component to reassure allies and to boost U.S. deterrent capability against China in a volatile regional security environment; b) vigorous U.S. participation in East Asian regional organizations such as the ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asian Summit, etc.; and c) ensured U.S. economic leadership in East Asia through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that was first initiated by the Bush Administration in 2008.

3.1. Strengthened American Military Posture in East Asia

The strategic rebalancing policy came not long after the second worst economic recession in American history (the first was the Great Depression of the 1930s) which began in 2008, and the proposed one trillion dollar reduction in U.S. defense spending over the next ten years. On the one hand, these developments created the perception that the U.S. was a declining power. China, on the other hand, weathered the global financial meltdown better than the U.S. did. Consequently, China became assertive in its international interactions, and invested in new military hardware to counter the U.S. forward-deployed forces in East Asia. The Obama Administration knew fully well that American military posture in the region is crucial to the U.S. as an offshore strategic balancer. The U.S., to boot, must show to its allies its preponderance as a Pacific power. Hence, the Pentagon was tasked to operationalize the military component of the rebalancing strategy to make

sure that the U.S. remains the primary guarantor of regional security for decades to come.²⁸

Basically, the strategic rebalance required reinforcing the Seventh Fleet to expand American strategic footprint from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia and to build up the capacities of the small states around China to protect their territorial rights. The first component involved shifting 60% of the U.S. Navy's ships to the Asia-Pacific, primarily its six aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and submarines. As part of this effort, the Pentagon replaced the *U.S.S. George Washington* with the newer *U.S.S. Ronald Reagan*. It will also position its most modern air-operations-oriented amphibious assault ship, the *U.S.S. America* to the region by 2020 – deploy two additional Aegis-capable destroyers to Japan; and home-port all three of its newest class of stealth destroyers, the DDG-1000, with the Pacific Fleet.²⁹ The Pentagon also plans to station the latest F-35 aircraft and two additional Virginia-class attack submarines in the Pacific.³⁰ Likewise, it will utilize the F-22, P-8A Poseidon maritime reconnaissance planes, V-22 Ospreys, B-2 bombers, advanced undersea drones, the new B-21 long-range strike bomber, and state-of-the-art tools for cyberspace, electronic warfare and space.³¹

Interestingly, the Pentagon has allowed the U.S. Third Fleet greater latitude to operate west of the International Date Line. This enables the San Diego-based Third Fleet to send more ships to East Asia which is outside its normal theatre of operations and to sail alongside the Japan-based Seventh Fleet.³² In April 2016, the Third Fleet deployed three Arleigh Burke-class destroyers to operate in the West Pacific as a surface-action group under the Third Fleet Forward Initiative.³³ In the future, more Third Fleet ships will be deployed in East Asia to conduct various maritime operations.³⁴ This massive deployment of air and naval assets in the West Pacific will allow the U.S. forces to “offset advanced A2/AD weapon systems proliferating in maritime Asia.”³⁵ It will also ensure U.S. military primacy in the Western Pacific by reducing the effectiveness of the PLAN's A2/AD. This thrust clearly pursues the deterrent/defensive role of U.S. forward-deployed forces in East Asia since the beginning of the 20th century – to prevent the rise of a hegemon that could constrain America's political, economic, and security interest in the Pacific.³⁶

The Pentagon has restructured the deployment of U.S. forward-deployed forces from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia to make them more geographically distributed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable. In this connection, the U.S. Navy has deployed its littoral combat ships (LCS) in Singapore and has negotiated with seven Southeast Asian countries for port calls.³⁷ The Pentagon will likewise deploy the Mobile Landing Platform (MLP) in Southeast Asia for the Seventh Fleet to carry out counter-piracy operations and disaster relief missions. The U.S. has also boosted its bilateral alliances with the Philippines and Australia. The U.S. signed the Enhanced

Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines and the Force Posture Agreement (FPA) with Australia. These agreements have the express goal of rotating naval ships and marines in Southeast Asia for expanded training with security partners.

The rebalancing strategy necessitated fortifying the defence capabilities of American allies to turn them into the bedrocks of the region's stability and security. To make its bilateral alliances relevant, the U.S. took three major steps:³⁸ First, it assured its allies of continued U.S. strategic commitment to East Asia by maintaining a significant force presence in the region, and actually increasing its military capacity by 2020. Second, it encouraged allies to collaborate more systematically and effectively beyond the traditional bilateral alliance network. Third, it urged its allies to engage in security partnerships and military capacity-building measures beyond the U.S. orbit of formal regional alliances but in ways meriting American support.

3.2. Vigorous U.S. Participation in East Asian Regional Organizations

Another important feature of the rebalancing strategy is the active American participation in Asian regional organizations specifically in the ASEAN. The ASEAN-constituted organizations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting, and the East Asian Summit (EAS) are the key players in the rebalancing strategy. Time and again, the U.S. emphasizes that it has a "strategic stake" in the peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute, as well as in the freedom of navigation, unimpeded legal commerce, and regional peace and stability, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and maritime security. Although not a claimant state in the maritime dispute, the U.S. supports the ASEAN's position that the territorial row be resolved peacefully through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the 1976 ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. This is clearly aimed at China which is developing its A2/AD capabilities to prevent U.S. forces from entering its operational territory and limit the Seventh Fleet's freedom of action in the disputed waters.

In November 2012, then President Obama visited three continental ASEAN countries, namely Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. Consequently, high-ranking U.S. officials urged their ASEAN partners to formulate a formal code of conduct in the South China Sea to resolve the maritime disputes.³⁹ The following year, the rebalancing strategy suffered a setback when the former president cancelled his long-planned visit to Brunei for the ASEAN related meetings (ASEAN-US Summit and the East Asian Summit) and to Indonesia for the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting. Then U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry reassured the ASEAN leaders that the president's absence

was due to political exigencies in Washington and that the ASEAN is a top priority for the U.S.⁴⁰

In the latter part of 2014, the Obama Administration rebounded as senior American officials reiterated at multilateral ASEAN-based meetings the importance of the regional organization to the U.S. rebalancing policy. Both President Obama and Secretary Kerry believed that through ASEAN, all states “big and small” in the region could work together for Asia’s security and prosperity. Unfortunately, a U.S. proposal that claimant states “freeze” all efforts to alter the *status quo* on the South China Sea islets they control was not endorsed in the November 2014 EAS meeting.⁴¹ This, however, did not deter the Obama Administration from pushing its maritime agenda in other regional forums. The following year, then Defense Secretary Ash Carter and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel were highly visible at key regional meetings as they pressed for a “rules-based system” through a formal code of conduct for negotiating and resolving the dispute.⁴²

Then President Obama maintained this position during the November 2015 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Meeting in Manila and at the annual ASEAN leaders’ summit in Kuala Lumpur the following week.⁴³ At these gatherings, he commended “ASEAN’s vital role in advancing a rules-based order for the Asia-Pacific and for working to ensure that all nations uphold international laws and norms, including the peaceful resolution of disputes, freedom of navigation, and freedom of overflight.”⁴⁴ On their part, the maritime states particularly the Philippines and Vietnam welcomed the U.S. position. These countries would not buckle under Chinese political pressure and military arm-twisting in a way that would undercut their Freedom of Navigation (FON) in the South China Sea and force them to relinquish the ASEAN’s *de facto* economic and diplomatic autonomy by joining a China-led “Community of Common Destiny.”⁴⁵

3.3. Ensuring American Economic Leadership in East Asia

The last significant feature of the strategic rebalancing to Asia is the assertion of U.S. economic leadership in the region through the TPP, a global trade pact initiated by the George P. Bush Administration in 2008. High on the priority list of the Obama administration, the TPP is the rebalancing policy’s economic component that creates a multi-country consortium that includes Canada, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand, Singapore, Australia, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, Japan and the U.S. In general, the agreement aims to eliminate trade barriers and streamlines trade, thus promoting foreign investments. Likewise, it simplifies investments rules and customs procedures, and institutionalizes an international dispute resolution system. It also intends to minimize corruption

and set standards for intellectual property rights and government procurement, including the strongest worker and environmental protection of any trade agreement in history.⁴⁶ All member-states are required to adopt financial and social reforms in the management of government-owned enterprises, trade liberalization, environmental protection, and human rights-related issues such as labour relations and human trafficking.⁴⁷

The TPP has two salient objectives.⁴⁸ The first is to produce a “gold standard” trade agreement to counter the low-value bilateral and regional deals negotiated and forged by several East Asia countries in recent years. The second is to ensure that the Asia-Pacific remains a viable economic unit for the U.S. Both goals are to thwart any economic integration projects initiated and crafted by China to exclude the U.S. from the region. More significantly, the TPP is designed to enhance U.S. access and leadership and to deepen as well the interdependence of the U.S. economy and the economies of its regional allies and security partners.

4. Blunting the Rebalancing Strategy: The BRI

Despite its reassuring effect on U.S. allies, the rebalancing policy hardly intimidated China. Instead, China challenged American strategic superiority by fortifying several land features in the South China Sea, conducting large-scale military exercises, engaging American allies in dangerous stand-offs, using coast guard vessels to assert China’s territorial claims, expanding the naval activities of the PLAN, and hastening the modernization of Chinese air and naval assets.⁴⁹ The deployment of more American forward-deployed forces so far has not deterred China from its expansionist moves. From China’s perspective, this course of action is worth pursuing since the U.S. is not willing to risk war despite growing Chinese strategic challenge against the U.S. Seventh Fleet and American allies. For China, territorial expansion is vital to its interests even to the extent of using force. For the U.S., the credibility of its defence commitments to its allies is important but not necessarily crucial since Chinese aggression does not directly threaten vital American security interests.

Furthermore, as a traditional and leading practitioner of economic statecraft or geo-economics, China uses its massive wealth to advance its geopolitical goal of blunting the Obama Administration’s rebalancing strategy to Asia.⁵⁰ China’s rapid economic growth and massive foreign exchange reserve have enabled it to reshape regional trade and investment patterns, and to influence geo-strategic developments in East Asia. China has relied on its economic power as assurance measures and inducements to neighbouring states to cooperate with it, but also used coercive economic measures like trade sanctions to punish countries opposing its policies.⁵¹ Confronted by

growing American naval presence in the Western Pacific, China pursues its maritime expansion by outflanking and blunting the U.S. rebalancing policy in the Asia-Pacific region through its huge foreign aid and several infrastructure projects under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI involved the building of comprehensive connectivity of countries and regions through infrastructures such as roads, railways and ports as well as communications and energy projects.⁵² The BRI seeks to connect regions and countries through the following: (1) a route stretching from Central Asia west through Russia to the Baltic; (2) a historical route starting from Central Asia turning towards Western Asia, passing through the Persian Gulf on its way to the Mediterranean Ocean; and (3) a route that passes through Southern China into Southeast Asia then leads through South Asia into the Indian Ocean.⁵³ To realize BRI's goal of greater connectivity, President Xi made the following proposals:⁵⁴ 1) China will provide more international public goods through connectivity development to its Asian neighbours; 2) economic cooperation would be provided to both land and maritime projects; 3) cooperation would be promoted regarding infrastructure development; and 4) China would commit US\$40 billion to establish a Silk Road Fund.

China has utilized infrastructure investments as an important foreign policy instrument in strengthening its economic relations with its neighbouring states.⁵⁵ Through the BRI initiative, as well as through expanding foreign investment and greater influence over its neighbouring countries in particular, and to the large international community in general, China is also aiming to deal with the possible slowdown in the economy.⁵⁶ BRI is also intended to shape its peripheral environment into forms favourable to China's vital interests. More significantly, this initiative is a manifestation of China's plan to effect major changes in the current international order in ways that would serve the country's long-term strategic and diplomatic goals.⁵⁷

In 2015, Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced that Chinese diplomacy would give full support to the promotion of the BRI.⁵⁸ As a tool of economic statecraft, the BRI enables China to use its massive financial resources and networks and human interchanges to create a more comprehensive economic and diplomatic relations with countries both in Europe and Asia. It also facilitates China's utilization of existing regional organizations to the greatest extent possible for negotiations and coordination for enhancing greater connectivity. Observing the geopolitical goal of this initiative, Professor Graham Allison notes:

...BRI is about much more than simply rechanneling excess industrial capacity. Just as the original Silk Road not only spurred trade but also stimulated geopolitical competition, BRI will allow China to project power

across several continents. BRI's promise to integrate the countries of Eurasia reflects a vision in which the balance of geostrategic power shifts to Asia.⁵⁹

Through the BRI, China outflanked the Obama Administration's rebalancing strategy as it directed towards the Eurasian region away from the Pacific, thus avoiding a direct confrontation with superior American maritime capabilities. This enables China to project its influence over its western periphery where U.S. power and interest are limited. This provides China the opportunity to seek a sphere of influence in a way analogous to British political geographer's Harold Mackinder's early 20th century thesis that the quest for global dominance starts by occupying the Eurasian heartland.⁶⁰ This will enable China to reap two major strategic advantages:⁶¹ a) expanding China's strategic manoeuvring space into Central Asia; and b) minimizing friction in U.S.-China relations.

The BRI, however, is a two-edge geo-political sword. It expands China's influence into Eurasian sub-continent away from the Pacific. On the other hand, it also projects Chinese influence into the east becoming China's 21st century Marshall Plan to blunt the U.S. strategic rebalancing to the Western Pacific.⁶² This is because it provides China an effective tool to drive a wedge between countries and within countries that it sees as having impact on its core interests such as Taiwan, Tibet and the South China Sea, or against any coalition of states that is challenging its expansionist agenda in East Asia. Furthermore, the BRI also strengthens China's hand in undermining military existing alliances and the current regional order while empowering it to create new power relationships and arrangements that exclude the U.S.

Through the promotion of this initiative, China demonstrated its goal to promote economic development over the 21st century Maritime Silk Road, which begins from its coastal provinces through the South China Sea to the South Pacific.⁶³ Although the BRI seems to provide public goods to the region by improving land and sea infrastructure, it also allows China to utilize that infrastructure network strategically and to exclude other countries.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the idea of enhancing the connectivity of the Indian Ocean is compatible with China's strategic interests of securing energy, solving the Malacca Dilemma, and securing the safe destinations for its investment capital, and more importantly, to lay down the ground work for the building of a regional order advantageous to China's expanding interest in the Indo-Pacific region.⁶⁵

5. Pondering on the Rebalancing Strategy

The Obama Administration's rebalancing policy is congruent with the constant U.S. strategic agenda in East Asia since the beginning of the 20th – to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon that could threaten American

political, economic and security interests. It is incumbent upon the incoming administration to formulate a new grand strategy, bereft of buzzwords like “pivot” or “rebalancing”, to make China aware that challenges to the U.S. role as East Asia’s offshore balancer will have grave strategic and diplomatic consequences despite the two countries’ interdependent economic relations. This strategy must enable the U.S. to deal with China from a position of strength based on American forward-deployed forces, regional alliances, partnerships and participation in regional multilateral organizations.

In the first months of the Trump Administration, White House officials examined in depth America’s strategic interests and involvement in East Asia – including some policies it inherited from the Obama Administration. Conscious that certain strategic developments in the region could harm U.S. security interests, the Trump Administration found it prudent to maintain and enhance U.S. strategic engagement in the region. Administration officials carefully weighed the Obama Administration’s calculation that the Asia-Pacific has become “a key driver of global politics” and “the rebalancing is a means for a sustained and coherent U.S. long-term strategy toward the region.”⁶⁶ This assessment demands asserting America’s leadership role in Asia and projecting its naval power to counter-balance China’s pervasive regional influence.⁶⁷

The Trump Administration observed that Asia’s economic dynamism generated by China’s emergence as a great power in East Asia co-exists with a number of specific security challenges. These include flashpoints such as Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula, the thorny China-Taiwan relationship, and the tense South China Sea imbroglio that involves unresolved territorial disputes, competition to secure marine resources, and freedom of navigation issues that threaten regional stability and American security interests.⁶⁸ It became aware that the prudent conduct of U.S. foreign policy in Asia must consider the broad trends of the region’s economic dynamism, China’s rising power, and its predecessor’s rebalancing strategy.

6. From Rebalancing to Strategic Competition

In 2013, in reaction to the Obama Administration’s strategic rebalancing and the Philippines’ filing of a case against China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) of the United Nations Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China began land reclamation activities on several low-tide elevations it occupies in the South China Sea. In just a year, China has built more than 10 square kilometres of reclaimed land on seven sites across an archipelago whose total land area had been originally approximated at four square kilometres.⁶⁹ Since 2015, it has constructed an expanded airstrip, a multilevel military facility, surveillance towers with possible weapons towers, and a deep water

port on the reclaimed land features.⁷⁰ The massive constructions on Subi and Mischief Reefs as the southern entrance have been widened probably to accommodate a naval base.⁷¹ Through these reclamation projects in the Spratlys, China creates new facts on the ground (and the water), sets up the playing field, and psychologically transforms the strategic calculation of the other claimant states. In the process, it shifts the propensity of things in favour of Chinese dominance (of the South China Sea) by manoeuvring the strategic configurations of the region.⁷²

As a matter of principle, the U.S. opposes “countries militarizing artificial islands and enforcing excessive maritime claims.”⁷³ At the tail end of the Obama Administration, then Defense Secretary Carter emphatically declared that the “U.S. will continue to fly, sail and operate where ever international law allows, so that everyone in the region can do the same.”⁷⁴ Secretary Mattis reiterated the same sentiment: “We will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, and demonstrate resolve through operational presence in the South China Sea and beyond.”⁷⁵ Like his predecessor, Secretary Mattis in espousing the freedom of navigation said “the U.S. remains committed to protecting the rights, freedoms and lawful use of the sea, and the ability of countries to exercise those rights in the strategically important East and South China Seas.”⁷⁶ He added that “freedom of navigation in the region is essential to economic health globally, and must be protected.”⁷⁷

Consequently, in May 2017, the U.S. Navy conducted three separate Freedom of Navigation (FONS) patrols near Chinese-occupied features in the South China Sea. The *USS Dewey* sailed near Mischief Reef on 25 May. In July, the *USS Stethem* navigated the Paracels to challenge the excessive maritime claims by China, Vietnam and Taiwan. This was followed by two U.S. B-1 Lancer bombers from Guam that flew over the South China Sea as a freedom of navigation flight. In August, the *USS John S. McCain* conducted another FON off Mischief Reef despite warning from a Chinese frigate asking the ship to leave Chinese waters.⁷⁸ The U.S. Seventh Fleet’s conduct of FONs in the South China Sea reflected a consistency with the Obama Administration’s strategic commitment to reinforce the rules-based order.⁷⁹

During the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2017, Secretary Mattis echoed all the themes stressed by previous administrations (especially the Obama Administration) on “the U.S. being a Pacific power, and the Asia-Pacific region being a priority for Washington.”⁸⁰ He declared that: “The United States is a Pacific nation in both geography and outlook.”⁸¹ He clearly stated that “the American Administration is demonstrating the priority we place on relationships in the Asia-Pacific region, a priority region for us.”⁸² Emphasizing that the U.S. has “an enduring commitment to the security and prosperity of the region,”⁸³ he affirmed that “security is the foundation of

prosperity, and the U.S. will continue to strengthen (its) military capabilities in the region. The U.S. military is proceeding with the rebalance of military forces to the Pacific as six out of the ten U.S. Navy ships, 55 percent of the Army, and two-thirds of the U.S. Marine Corps are assigned to the U.S. Pacific Command.⁸⁴ The majority of the Navy and the Air Force are deployed in the Asia-Pacific region.⁸⁵ Curiously, Secretary Mattis also made this veiled warning to China: “We oppose countries militarizing artificial islands, and enforcing maritime claims unsupported by international law. We cannot and we will not accept unilateral, coercive changes to the *status quo* (in the South and East China Seas).⁸⁶

During the same event, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chief of Staff General Joe Dunford, eased the Asian nations’ anxiety about perceived U.S. retreat from the region by commenting that U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region is healthy, robust and valuable.⁸⁷ He also confirmed that a majority of American ships and air assets are being deployed in the Pacific, specifically the newest and most capable platforms in the region such as F-22 Raptors, F-35 Lightning II joint strike fighters, and E-8 Poseidon reconnaissance planes.⁸⁸ Shortly after, the Department of Defense released its annual report which concluded that with its increasing expansion into the South China Sea, China will be able to use its reclaimed land features in the disputed waters “as persistent civil-military bases to enhance its long-term presence in the South China Sea significantly.”⁸⁹ All these developments support the view that sustaining American strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific and working with allies and security partners enable the U.S. to influence China’s choices and make it pay a price in its transgressions against international laws and norms.⁹⁰

7. Preparing for the Strategic Competition

In his 10 November 2017 speech during the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC) summit in Hanoi, Vietnam, President Trump criticized China from “using its economic inducements, and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda.”⁹¹ On 18 December 2017, the Trump Administration released the “*National Security Strategy (NSS)*,” which provides the overview for his administration’s national security threats and the blueprint on how it will address these threats. In January 2017, the DOD came out with the unclassified portion of the “*National Defense Strategy (NDS)*,” which describes how the defence department’s strategic goals and capabilities will be directed to support the *NSS* objectives.

The *NDS* characterized China as a revisionist power whose military modernization agenda seeks “Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near

term and the displacement of the U.S. to achieve a global preeminence in the future.” It argues that there is a real possibility that in the near future (likely decades) China may be able to surpass the U.S. and then harness its capital to develop superior military technology that can enable it to overthrow the current international system. These two documents are open declarations by the U.S. to confront China in a highly competitive great game in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹² A dynamic great power game between the U.S. and China will generate a very volatile regional security environment. Pushing the U.S. out of the Indo-Pacific region is no easy task, and the military component of China is primarily naval in nature.⁹³ The U.S. has observed that in recent years, China has deployed its growing military capabilities in an effort to exert control over virtually all of the waters and resources off its eastern seaboard. The U.S., however, does not intend to be displaced by China’s growing naval power and thus, American sea-power will have to take the responsibility of defeating China should it choose the path of armed conflict.⁹⁴

To prevent China from pushing the U.S. out of the region, the *NSS* provides for the deployment of robust and powerful forward-deployed American forces, the build-up of its alliances, and the need to help build its security partners’ naval capabilities. The *NDS* categorically states the need for the U.S. to prepare for war to deter conflict in three key regions: Indo-Pacific, Europe and the Middle East Asia.⁹⁵ In the Indo-Pacific region, the *NDS* calls for the U.S. to strengthen its alliances and partnerships in the region to a networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains.⁹⁶ It urges the U.S. to bring together bilateral and multilateral security relationships to preserve the free and open international system.⁹⁷

The two documents have been described as realist, Darwinian, and pessimistic as they advance the view that “great power competition has returned with China and Russia beginning to reassert their influence regionally and globally.”⁹⁸ The *NSS* and *NDS* point out that great power competition, not terrorism, has emerged as the central challenge to U.S. security strategy and prosperity. Both documents claimed that two regional powers, China and Russia, want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian values, and in the process, replace the free and open order that has enabled global security and prosperity since the Second World War.⁹⁹

Earlier in November 2017, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) was revived in Manila on the sides of the East Asian Summit (EAS). Upon the initiative of the U.S. and Australia, it took shape again as a four-cornered dialogue, emerging from a phoenix-like creature after a 10-year dormancy signalling the first multilateral pushback against an expansionist China. The original QUAD was formed on the sides of the ASEAN Regional Forum

(ARF) Summit in Manila in 2007.¹⁰⁰ Its goal was to provide a platform for these four Indo-Pacific states to exchange views on regional security issues with a special focus on the rise of China and its implication for Asian Security.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, the original QUAD experienced a premature and sudden death when the Kevin Rudd-led Australia succumbed to Chinese diplomatic pressure to withdraw the country from the association, and as the Indian government tried to earn Chinese goodwill as it kept Japan out of its annual bilateral naval exercise with the U.S.

The QUAD's revival stemmed from the four members' consensus that Chinese behaviour since 2008, with regard to territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, the terms and strategic impact of BRI, the lack of reciprocity in economic relations, and the use of economic leverage, has increased concerns among their respective governments.¹⁰² There was a unanimity among the four states that while Beijing has expected reassurance and wants others to respect its sensitivities and aspirations, it hasn't returned the favour.¹⁰³ The revival of the association was meant to send a diplomatic warning to China that it should not underestimate its members' legitimate concern about its strategic behavior in recent years.¹⁰⁴ The QUAD aims to impress on China that there is "strength in numbers."¹⁰⁵ These four states reject any suggestion that the QUAD will become an Asian North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or an alliance in the making. However, they believe that if they would not collectively confront China's efforts to effect a revision of the current territorial and maritime arrangement, the next five years could enhance China's geo-strategic position. This means the unravelling of the current liberal international order in the Indo-Pacific region and its replacement by a Chinese-led illiberal/authoritarian regional order.¹⁰⁶

The Trump Administration's decision to engage China in a strategic competition, and the revival of the QUAD led to the use of the geostrategic term Indo-Pacific to replace the old Asia-Pacific. The term is now increasingly used to replace the old geopolitical term "Asia-Pacific". Consequently, the common term "Asia-Pacific" is now hardly mentioned and instead, the term "Indo-Pacific" is commonly used in policy circles. Increasingly, the international relations of the Asia-Pacific are now connected with the Indian Ocean part of Asia creating a larger and more dynamic regional system. Rather than be restricted by the old term Asia-Pacific region, the term Indo-Pacific region underscores the expansion of the ongoing competition between China and the U.S. and the other members of the QUAD.

In the first four months of 2018, the Trump Administration emphasized its characterization of China as a threat to U.S. interests.¹⁰⁷ This was publicized during his first State of the Union Address as President Trump maintained that China is a threat that challenges U.S. economic and military interests.¹⁰⁸

8. Conclusion

The 2016 election of Donald Trump did not spell the end of the Obama Administration's strategic rebalancing to Asia. For the Trump Administration, the Asia-Pacific remains a top security priority for the U.S. because of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and more importantly, China's naval build-up and island-building activities and militarization of the South China Sea that threatened not only the freedom of navigation but also the rules-based international order. It has directed the U.S. military to proceed with the rebalancing of its forces and their capabilities to the Asia-Pacific region. These developments indicate that despite its initial opposition to the Obama Administration's rebalancing policy to Asia, the current administration realizes that on the basis of geography, interests and values, the U.S. is a Pacific power which plays an important role in shaping the future of this dynamic region.

The Trump Administration's current foreign policy on the Indo-Pacific region reflects both continuity as well as discontinuity with the Obama Administration's rebalancing strategy. On the one hand, the Trump Administration's policy towards Asia reflects continuity as high-ranking administration officials visited the region and with President Trump receiving the leaders of several East Asian states at the White House. These were carefully calibrated policies taken by the current administration to send a reassuring signal that U.S. engagement with the region would be built upon the foundation laid down by the Obama Administration.

On the other hand, the Trump Administration foreign policy also reflects discontinuity as it aimed to engage China in a long and tense strategic competition. By labelling China as a competitor, the Trump Administration has discounted any possibility that China will evolve as a "responsible stakeholder" or a "normal great power". Rather, from Washington's perspective, China's current diplomatic, economic, and strategic efforts are creating a Sinocentric East Asia where the U.S. will be rendered as a pariah. Consequently, the Trump Administration is pushing back against China fully aware that the U.S. still possesses substantial military and economic capabilities that are far greater than this emergent and assertive power. The Trump Administration's policy of engaging China in a strategic competition will set back the hands of time to the U.S.-Sino conflict in the early years of the Cold War, when American and Chinese values, interests and policies were simply adversarial without any convergence. However, this 21st Sino-U.S. competition is different because both countries' materiel/technological capabilities and global reach are considerably greater than they were in the 1950s.

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Notes

* Renato Cruz De Castro is a professor in the International Studies Department, De La Salle University, Manila. He was a visiting fellow in the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) of the Japanese Ministry of Defense in the summer of 2018. From June to August 2017, Professor De Castro was invited by the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIJA) as a visiting research fellow. He was based in East-West Center in Washington D.C. as the U.S.-ASEAN Fulbright Initiative Researcher from the Philippines from September to December 2016. He is an alumnus of the Daniel Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii, U.S.A. In 2009, he became the U.S. State Department ASEAN Research Fellow from the Philippines and was based in the Political Science Department of Arizona State University. Professor De Castro has conducted several courses on International Relations and Security Studies in the National Defense College and Foreign Service Institute.

He earned his Ph.D. from the Government and International Studies Department of the University of South Carolina as a Fulbright Scholar in 2001, and obtained his B.A. and two master's degrees from the University of the Philippines. As a member of the Board of Trustees of the Albert Del Rosario Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ADRI), he contributes his two monthly opinion columns to the *Business World* and *Philippine Star*. He has written over 100 articles on international relations and security that have been published in a number of scholarly journals, monographs, and edited works in the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Malaysia, France, Singapore, Taiwan, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. He can be reached at <renato.decastro@dlsu.edu.ph>.

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