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CHAPTER 2

THE OBAMA REBALANCE AND
US POLICY TOWARDS CHINA*Evan Resnik*

The Obama administration's rebalance towards the Asia Pacific marks an ambitious attempt to reorient US grand strategy in response to that region's rapidly growing economic and geopolitical salience. Unveiled in late 2011, the rebalance—which was initially referred to as the pivot—has aimed to enhance the United States' military, economic, and diplomatic profile in East Asia. Critics of this policy, however, have charged that the rebalance is merely a fig leaf for a nascent US effort to contain a rising and increasingly assertive China. This charge is inaccurate insofar as the United States has consistently pursued a policy of militarily containing China since the early 1950s, but it correctly implies that the rebalance constitutes something of a policy departure. In this essay, I argue that since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, successive US administrations have slowly though inexorably

strengthened and expanded the preexisting military cordon surrounding China, and maintain that the Obama administration has continued this trend.

Perpetuation of this creeping containment of China is ill-advised because it raises the probability of a direct confrontation between the United States and China even as it weakens Washington's deterrent credibility. International relations scholars maintain that successful deterrence rests, at minimum, on the deterring state successfully convincing the party it is seeking to deter that it possesses both the power and the resolve to make good on its threat if undesired behavior is undertaken by the latter. By expanding US defense commitments to states and territories that are marginal to US vital interests yet that are considered in Beijing to be integral to Chinese national security, the Obama administration increases the likelihood of a crisis between the region's two nuclear-armed juggernauts on terms that do not favor the United States. In this vein, officials of the current administration should revisit the actions of their Cold War predecessors, who wisely strengthened their containment policy towards the Soviet Union by carefully restricting its geographic scope to states in Western Europe and Northeast Asia that they considered absolutely integral to US national security. At the same time, they helped prevent the superpower competition from boiling over into a third world war by consistently granting a sphere of influence to Moscow over those states in Eastern Europe that were considered by Soviet leaders to be vital to the survival of the USSR. It would therefore behoove the present administration to more carefully align its defense commitments with core US geopolitical interests in East Asia so it can more responsibly steer the ship of state between the Scylla of appeasement and the Charybdis of unnecessary war. This process, which necessitates the belated acknowledgement that China possesses vital national interests of its own, must involve the acceptance by Washington of a growing Chinese role in the policing of the region's sea lanes, which increasingly serve as the central arteries of the global trading order.

THE ELEMENTS OF THE REBALANCE

In late 2011, the Obama administration unofficially inaugurated the pivot/rebalance in a sequence of speeches, announcements, and publications by senior officials. Under its aegis, the administration has undertaken an array of military, economic, and diplomatic initiatives. Militarily, the White House has initiated the deployment of a full Marine Air Ground Task Force (comprising 2,500 personnel) to Darwin, Australia and announced plans to secure enhanced US access to Australian air and naval bases, begun the de facto basing of four cutting-edge Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore, slightly increased the US troop presence in South Korea, and has concluded an Enhanced Cooperation Defense Agreement (ECDA) with the Philippines which enables the more frequent rotation of US troops and surveillance aircraft in that country. Also, during his April 2014 trip to Japan, Obama publicly declared that the US alliance with Japan extends to a chain of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea that have been claimed by both Japan and China.¹ In addition, the United States has ramped up the tempo of joint military exercises with regional allies and strategic partners, including India. Further, Washington has also restored defense cooperation with New Zealand and Indonesia, has enhanced defense cooperation with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia, and has proposed such cooperation with Myanmar. Finally, the administration has declared that by 2020, the US Navy will shift from a 50/50 distribution of its capabilities in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters, to a 60/40 split favoring the Pacific.²

To some extent, the economic and diplomatic planks of the rebalance have been overshadowed by the attention that has been drawn to the aforementioned military initiatives. Economically, the United States has spearheaded talks aimed at creating a region-wide free trading zone, referred to as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), consisting of twelve partner states.³ Diplomatically, the administration has undertaken several moves to enhance the regional profile and influence of the United States. First, the administration has made a point of actively and consistently

participating in various multilateral forums, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the newly created ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus Eight (ADMM+8). Second, and relatedly, the administration has dispatched senior policymakers to the region to attend at a considerably more frequent rate than its immediate predecessors. For example, in her first three years on the job, Hillary Clinton made many more visits to East Asia than had each of her three predecessors. Third, it has ended the long-standing US policy of estrangement towards Myanmar, and has begun to vigorously engage the reformist regime of Thein Sein.⁴ Fourth, it has adopted a more intrusive position in the maritime dispute between China and several claimant states in the South China Sea. Specifically, in August 2012, the administration released a public statement explicitly castigating China for deploying fishing vessels to the Scarborough Shoal, which has been claimed by both China and the Philippines, and for establishing a garrison on Woody Island, another disputed territory.⁵

AMERICA'S POST-COLD WAR "CREEPING CONTAINMENT" OF CHINA

This panoply of United States initiatives has been interpreted by some critics as a nascent attempt to implement a containment regime against the PRC. According to one US analyst, "leading Chinese thinkers view [US actions taken as part of the pivot] as undermining China's security and increasingly believe the unifying rationale for such a seemingly coordinated US approach is to constrain China's rise."⁶ Domestic critics of the policy have made similar accusations. For instance, *Forbes* columnist Stephen Harner claims that the pivot is "in essence an American reprise of Cold War 'containment' now directed at China."⁷ In response, senior US decision makers have strenuously denied that the pivot/rebalance is a euphemism for a new policy of containing China.⁸

Both parties are correct, though only partially so. Critics of the rebalance accurately claim that the policy is aimed at the containment of China and

that it represents something of a departure in the US approach towards the PRC, but are incorrect in their assertion that the strategy is fundamentally new. Meanwhile, administration officials are correct in their profession that the rebalance does not mark a fundamental transformation of US policy towards one of containment, but erroneously posit that it has nothing at all to do with containing China. In essence, the rebalance is both old and new. On the one hand, it merely perpetuates a broad strategy of military containment towards the People's Republic of China that has been consistently pursued by all US administrations since the early 1950s. On the other hand, it continues a recent trend by which successive administrations since the early 1990s have incrementally expanded the containment strategy inherited from the early Cold War period.

All presidential administrations since that of Harry S. Truman have consistently sought to contain China's military expansion. The victory of Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese civil war and Mao's subsequent intervention in the Korean War against United Nations forces one year later prompted US President Harry S. Truman to deploy the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait and provide US military assistance to the Chinese Nationalist government, which had retreated to Taiwan after its defeat in the civil war. The subsequent administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower penned mutual defense treaties with the Nationalist-led Republic of China (ROC), the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand, and deployed US troops to the region in large numbers.⁹ Although the United States abrogated its formal defense commitment to Taiwan during the period of Sino-US rapprochement of the 1970s, it nevertheless continued to signal Beijing that it would not tolerate military aggression against the ROC. To wit, Washington continued to insist on a peaceful resolution to the cross-strait conflict between mainland China and Taiwan and continued to periodically sell arms to Taipei, as mandated by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act.¹⁰

Importantly, although the United States never deviated from its strategy of containing Chinese expansionism for the duration of the Cold War,

in the early 1970s it abandoned its complementary effort to minimize bilateral diplomatic, economic, military, and cultural contacts with the PRC and began to actively promote such contacts.¹¹ For the first two decades or so after the revolution, successive US administrations practiced a policy of comprehensive estrangement or isolation towards China, minimizing bilateral diplomatic, economic, and cultural contacts between the two states, and opposed the mainland government's accession to international institutions, particularly the UN. This policy began to shift under the stewardship of President Richard M. Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, in the early 1970s, in response to shared US and Chinese fears of rising Soviet power and adventurism. The constructive engagement of China picked up steam following the advent to power in Beijing of Deng Xiaoping, who espoused an economic policy of expanding trade with the West.¹²

The US engagement of China, which was initially motivated by the desire to counterbalance a growing Soviet threat to both countries in the 1970s and 1980s, has intensified since the demise of the Soviet Union. During the post-Cold War period of sustained US unipolarity, containment-plus-engagement has been perpetuated as a hedging strategy to cope with China's rising power and potential emergence as a future peer competitor of the United States. Even as post-Cold War US administrations have continued to engage China in the hope of inducing its leaders to not only accept but also help uphold the US-led international order, they have maintained a set of regional security commitments in East Asia aimed at deterring any Chinese military effort to overturn that order.¹³ The post-Cold War dynamism of the engagement element of US policy is reflected in the fact that China and the United States now constitute each other's second largest trade partners.¹⁴ In addition, the two countries have elaborated a dense web of bilateral diplomatic and military dialogues, the United States has promoted China's integration into the World Trade Organization and other important international institutions, and both countries have opened their borders to the large-scale entry of civilians from the other.¹⁵

Even as Washington has continued enhancing bilateral diplomatic, economic, and military contacts with China since the end of the Cold War, it has also subtly and incrementally bolstered the containment component of its China policy. Although all US administrations since that of Truman have consistently endeavored to deter Chinese military and geopolitical expansionism, the strength and scope of the US defense cordon surrounding China have grown incrementally since the end of the Cold War, in a process that I refer to as "creeping containment." Each of the four presidents that have held office since 1991, George H. W. Bush, William J. Clinton, George W. Bush, and, most recently, Barack Obama, has discretely contributed to this process.

Although George H.W. Bush generally pursued a friendly policy towards the PRC, late in his single term in office he took a major step towards strengthening Taiwan's military capabilities. During the summer of 1992, Bush announced the impending sale of 150 F-16 fighter aircraft to Taiwan. With this decision, which was in part driven by the desire to both distance his administration from the PRC and spur domestic job-creation during a heated presidential campaign, the Bush administration reversed a decade-long US refusal to provide Taiwan with the cutting-edge F-16's on the grounds that the sale would violate the August 1982 Communique concluded by the US and Chinese governments, which restricted America's arms sales to the ROC to "defensive" weapons systems.¹⁶

During Clinton's two terms in office, although the administration famously reneged on early promises to render the continued engagement of China conditional on Beijing's human rights performance, it nevertheless took several steps to strengthen containment. First, in 1994 the administration liberalized the protocol rules pertaining to the US treatment of Taiwanese diplomats, which had been strictly observed since their formulation in 1981. Second, the next year, the State Department extended a visa to Taiwan's president, Lee Teng-hui, to visit the United States for the purpose of attending his class reunion at Cornell

University. According to scholar Robert Ross, a leading Chinese authority construed this decision to be “the latest step in a dangerous post-Cold War trend that could lead to a Taiwan declaration of independence.”¹⁷ Third, and most importantly, in March 1996, the administration responded aggressively to China's test-launch of surface-to-surface M-9 ballistic missiles into the waters off Taiwan's coast. Following the tests, which were conducted to intimidate Taiwanese voters into casting their ballots against Lee Teng-hui in upcoming national elections, the White House ordered two US aircraft carrier battle groups into the waters east of Taiwan.¹⁸ Fourth, in August 1995, the White House normalized bilateral diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which set the stage for enhanced defense cooperation between the two former wartime adversaries, culminating in the landmark trip by Clinton's Secretary of Defense William Cohen to Hanoi in March 2000.¹⁹

Creeping containment proceeded apace during the subsequent two-term administration of Republican George W. Bush. Within months of his inauguration in 2001, Bush abandoned the long-standing US policy of strategic ambiguity regarding Taiwan. Since the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, successive administrations had refrained from explicitly declaring whether the United States would intervene militarily in the event of a PRC attack against Taiwan, in the hopes of deterring not only such an attack, but also a reckless declaration of independence by Taiwan. During the April 2001 interview with journalist Charlie Gibson, Bush was asked whether the United States had an obligation to defend Taiwan in the event it was attacked by China, to which he answered: “Yes, we do, and the Chinese must understand that. Yes, I would.” When pressed by Gibson whether he employ the “full force of American military,” Bush replied, “[w]hatever it took to help Taiwan defend themselves [sic].”²⁰

The Bush administration also enhanced defense cooperation with Vietnam and inaugurated such cooperation with Cambodia. Continuing bilateral negotiations between the United States and Vietnam yielded the

first port calls by US naval vessels in Vietnamese ports in late 2003. Then, two years later, the White House enabled Vietnam to begin participating in the Pentagon's International Military Education Program (IMET) and began to sell some nonlethal armaments to the DRV, while Hanoi slightly loosened its previous restriction on US port visits of one ship per year. Finally, in June 2008, following on the heels of Secretary Rumsfeld's successful visit to Hanoi two years earlier, Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Tan Dung travelled to Washington to meet with President Bush at the White House.²¹ On this occasion, Bush not only hailed the “positive, growing friendship [and] mutual respect,” that had emerged between the United States and Vietnam, but also notably expressed “support for Vietnam's national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity.”²² Meanwhile, during Bush's second term in office, the United States inaugurated a token International Military Education and Training (IMET) program with Cambodia worth \$49,000 and two US warships made port calls to the country.²³

Even prior to its inauguration of the rebalance in late 2011, the Obama administration had already taken steps to build upon its immediate predecessors' containment policy. For example, in 2009 the administration established a program of foreign military financing (FMF) for Vietnam, began allowing Vietnamese military and civilian officials to participate in “fly-outs” to nearby US aircraft carriers to observe launch and recovery operations, authorized US naval vessels to be repaired in Vietnamese shipyards, initiated joint naval exercises with the SRV, and began admitting Vietnamese officers to US staff colleges and institutions of military education.²⁴ These initiatives set the stage for Secretary of Defense Panetta's June 2012 visit to the country, during which he announced the administration's intention to “try to take this relationship to a new level,” by attempting to secure US naval access to Cam Ranh Bay, one of Asia's most strategically important deep-water ports.²⁵ Also, in 2010, the administration effected a “marked upturn”²⁶ in bilateral defense relations with Cambodia by permitting Phnom Penh to open a defense attaché office in the United States, inviting Cambodia to participate in the annual

US-led Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise, establishing an annual US-Cambodian peacekeeping exercise (Angkor Sentinel), and stationing special forces personnel at the US embassy in Phnom Penh to conduct joint counterterrorism training with their Cambodian counterparts. It also tripled spending on defense cooperation activities with Cambodia, bringing that figure to a total of \$18.2 million.²⁷

The most significant administration action prior to the introduction of the rebalance pertained to the long-standing maritime dispute between China and several of its neighbors, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, regarding the ownership of several uninhabited island chains in the South China Sea. During the July 2010 annual meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, Secretary of State Clinton issued a public statement of the official US position on the South China Sea dispute, which superseded a previous 1995 statement. The July 2010 statement introduced new elements to the US position that indicated a more hostile stance towards China's negotiating position. Specifically, it rejected the validity of China's "nine-dashed line" claim to maritime rights over most of the South China Sea by asserting that "legitimate" maritime claims in the South China Sea "should be derived solely from legitimate claims to land features," and took issue with China's preference for a series of bilateral negotiations over the contested island chains by advocating a "collaborative diplomatic process" for resolving the disputes.²⁸

Since the advent of the rebalance in late 2011, the Obama administration has continued to expand containment. Militarily, it has expanded US military deployments to Australia, South Korea, Singapore, and the Philippines, and it has intensified defense cooperation with New Zealand, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Diplomatically, it has adopted an increasingly intrusive and confrontational policy towards China in both the East and South China Sea maritime disputes, and has begun courting Myanmar as a potential strategic partner.

By perpetuating the post-Cold War strategy of creeping containment, the Obama administration is intensifying Chinese insecurities even as China's military is becoming increasingly powerful and, therefore, increasingly capable of acting on them. Most dangerously, by expanding the US defense perimeter around China, the administration is paradoxically weakening its ability to deter China from using military force to redress its insecurities and therefore is elevating the risk of a potentially catastrophic US clash with the PRC. As the US military cordon around China becomes increasingly constrictive, the balance of interests and resolve between the two countries becomes increasingly favorable to the latter, thereby increasing its likelihood of instigating a conflict. Although the overall balance of military power in the region continues to grossly favor the United States, this advantage will deteriorate to the extent that Washington establishes formal or even informal security commitments to states that US elites and the general public care far less about than do their Chinese counterparts.

CONTAINMENT DURING THE COLD WAR

In assessing the creeping containment of China, it is instructive to examine the most recent instance in which the United States attempted to contain a rising peer competitor. Between the late 1940s and 1991, the United States consistently pursued a policy of military containment towards its Cold War adversary, the Soviet Union. Ultimately, the policy proved to be a triumphant success, ending with the peaceful fragmentation of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe in late 1989, which was followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself in 1991. The Cold War ended almost exactly in the manner predicted by US diplomat George F. Kennan, the architect of the containment doctrine, in his landmark 1947 article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," which appeared in the magazine *Foreign Affairs*. In the essay, Kennan presciently expressed the hope that "the long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies," would eventually "result in either the

break up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power. For no mystical, messianic movement—and particularly not that of the Kremlin—can face frustration indefinitely without eventually adjusting itself in one way or another to the logic of that state of affairs.”²⁹

A cardinal aspect of US grand strategy during the Cold War was the careful consideration that policymakers devoted to precisely delineating the defense perimeter that they put in place to deter Soviet expansionism. Although this perimeter shifted erratically at times in the periphery of the security competition between the superpowers, it remained highly consistent at the core. All Cold War presidents from Truman to (George H. W.) Bush hewed to the decision made by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the early months of 1945 to grant the USSR a *de facto* sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Although the Big Three leaders of the World War II Grand Alliance—Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin—pledged to install representative democratic governments in countries liberated from the Axis powers, Roosevelt ultimately stood aside as Stalin crushed noncommunist political leaders and parties in Poland and neighboring territories that had fallen under Red Army occupation. The Kremlin proceeded to establish its hegemony over what would collectively become known as the East Bloc. Although some peripheral members of the Bloc, such as Yugoslavia and Romania, were permitted to exercise a modicum of autonomy from Moscow, tight limits were placed on the extent to which the East European satellites, and particularly the most important ones of East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, were able to stray from their Soviet overlords. To wit, the Red Army marched into East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968 to prevent the potential defection of those states from the Soviet orbit.

Despite their rhetorical professions to the contrary, successive US administrations effectively acquiesced to the partition of Europe. Even President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his hawkish Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who pledged to seek the “liberation” of Eastern Europe and

“rollback” of Soviet hegemony over that region, passively stood aside as Soviet forces brutally crushed the Hungarian revolution 1956.³⁰

By simultaneously appeasing Moscow in Eastern Europe while deterring it from expanding into Western Europe or Japan, the United States drew a defense perimeter that closely reflected the balance of resolve between the two superpowers. The keystones of containment were the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, which formally bound the United States to the defense of Western Europe and the 1952 Mutual Security Treaty, which bound it to Japan. These arrangements meant that the United States pledged to defend those countries whose independence was considered by its leaders to be absolutely integral to American national security, even as it refrained from issuing security guarantees to the states of East Europe whose fate they viewed as being far less important to US national security. Conversely, they ceded control to the Soviets over the belt of countries that the Kremlin viewed as integral to Russian national security. After having lost tens of millions of its citizens and soldiers repelling two German invasions in both world wars, not to mention its invasion and occupation by Napoleonic France in the prior century, Soviet decision makers were desperate to establish a buffer zone adjacent to its western border in order to obstruct or at least slow down any repeat performance by the United States and its NATO allies. By comparison, they were far less intent on imposing communist rule on the more distant countries of Western Europe or on Japan. This detached attitude was evident in Stalin’s tepid support for the communist revolutionaries in Greece and the communist parties that sought to win electoral victories in postwar France and Italy.³¹

In sum, containment worked during the Cold War because Washington only guaranteed the security of those states that it was most highly resolved to protect from Soviet depredations, which also happened to be the states that the Soviets were least resolved to dominate.³² America’s deterrence of the USSR was strengthened not only by the high credibility of its alliance commitments to Western Europe and Japan, but also by the

fact that it did not extend to the East European states that the Kremlin was most highly resolved to control. Notably, although this shrewd combination of containment and appeasement was arguably necessary to protect US vital interests, prevent the outbreak of World War III, and eventually catalyze the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union, it was hardly cost-free. The decision to grant the Soviets a sphere of influence over Eastern Europe effectively consigned tens of millions of innocent civilians caught behind the Iron Curtain to repressive and vicious communist rule for nearly half a century.³³

RECONCEIVING CONTAINMENT 2.0 IN ASIA

In sharp contrast to the containment of the Soviet Union that was practiced by the United States during the Cold War, the creeping containment currently being practiced by the United States towards China has imprudently ignored the importance of the balance of resolve in underpinning successful deterrence. Even prior to the inauguration of the pivot, critics of US foreign policy in Asia warned that the ambiguous US security commitment to Taiwan was extremely problematic due to China's far greater stake in the matter than that of the United States. In short, Chinese elites, as well as the general public, feel much more strongly about the need to return Taiwan, which they consider to be a renegade province, to the sovereignty of the PRC than their US counterparts feel about ensuring a peaceful resolution of the cross-Strait dispute.³⁴ Further, the balance of power in the region continues to swing away from the United States and towards the PRC, exacerbating the risk of provocation and war across the Straits. The Obama rebalance to Asia promises to increase the number of potential flashpoints by expanding the US defense perimeter to the East and South China Sea islands, as well as to the landed states of Southeast Asia that lie right next door to China: namely, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. As is the case with Taiwan, China is far more resolved to keep these adjacent states loyal to Beijing than the United States is resolved to defend them against Chinese encroachments.

It is a virtual axiom of international politics that as states become more powerful, they seek to establish greater control over their immediate environment in order to enhance their security and influence.³⁵ It beggars belief that as China's wealth and military power continue to grow at spectacular rates, that Beijing will continue to tolerate a regional status quo in which the United States progressively restricts its room for geopolitical maneuver. Consequently, US leaders need to better emulate their Cold War predecessors by more carefully and soberly considering how the effective containment of China can be achieved short of provoking a hegemonic war that would devastate East Asia, send shockwaves through the global economy, and potentially even spark a nuclear conflagration.

To this end, they must contemplate conciliating some of China's most pressing geopolitical insecurities while simultaneously protecting the United States' foremost interests and strategic partners. It would be ludicrous, given China's continuing military weakness relative to the United States (and even more so, relative to the United States and its formal allies in the region combined) to contemplate ceding a huge sphere of influence to Beijing that would be commensurate with that granted to Stalin's USSR after World War II. Nevertheless, in light of China's continuing rise, it would hardly be ludicrous to consider taking a series of smaller-scale steps aimed at ameliorating Chinese anxieties. Along these lines, it would behoove the Obama administration to deemphasize the military elements of the rebalance. This would entail reducing the tempo of military exercises in the region, suspending efforts to militarily engage the landed Southeast Asian states of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar, and imposing a moratorium on arms sales to the ROC.

Most importantly, the White House should quietly disentangle itself from the complex maritime disputes between China and various US allies and strategic partners in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Its continued involvement in these disputes has not only emboldened its allies and partners, particularly Japan and the Philippines, to adopt

extremely rigid negotiating positions, but has also led China to reciprocate, producing a spike in regional tensions.³⁶ This in turn has significantly raised the risk of war, into which the United States would be drawn in as a participant, over stakes that are marginal at best to US vital interests. This would be less difficult to do with respect to the South China Sea dispute, in which the administration has refrained from making concrete security commitments to any of the claimants, even in the case of the Philippines, which is a formal treaty ally. By contrast, now that President Obama has publicly declared that the US alliance commitment to Japan extends to the Senkaku/Diaoyu, a public retraction of that commitment could be highly destabilizing. Instead, Obama should quietly inform Prime Minister Abe that the United States will categorically abstain from any naval war initiated in the East China Sea and publicly offer to facilitate talks between Japan and the PRC aimed at resolving the maritime dispute.³⁷

A somewhat more judicious, prudent, and conciliatory Asia policy on Washington's part would also make sense in light of pressing domestic political and economic constraints. Not only is the US public suffering from war-fatigue, but defense budgets are in absolute decline, the national economy continues to underperform, and pressing domestic needs in the areas of social welfare, education, health care, and infrastructure continue to be unmet. Policymakers in Washington must recognize that the burgeoning strategic competition with China necessitates not only a strong military for the purpose of deterring and, if necessary, defeating China on the battlefield, but also a vibrant and competitive national economy to sustain that military edge over the long term.

Although the comparison between America's Cold War containment of the Soviet Union and its post-Cold War creeping containment of China is instructive, it should not be overdrawn. Several differences render the latter case both more challenging and less dangerous than the former one. On the one hand, current US efforts to contain China will prove more challenging than its Cold War efforts to contain the USSR

for three reasons. First, during the Cold War, the United States pursued an internally consistent strategy of both containing and economically isolating the USSR, while the current US strategy of containment-plus-engagement towards China is internally inconsistent. Notwithstanding variations in the precise execution of grand strategy within and across administrations, Cold War-era containment aimed at both immediately deterring Soviet military expansion and weakening the Soviet capacity to undertake such expansion over the long-term by weakening the economic sinews of Soviet military power.³⁸ By contrast, the US strategy of containment-plus-engagement is internally inconsistent as it strives to deter Chinese expansion while it simultaneously strengthens the economic sinews of Chinese military power.³⁹ In effect, this means that the United States is progressively undermining its own ability to contain China over the long-term.

Second, and relatedly, containing China is more difficult owing to the high level of US economic dependence on the PRC. During the Cold War, the US economy was almost completely independent of that of the Soviet Union, which deprived the latter of any meaningful capability to engage in economic statecraft towards the United States.⁴⁰ By contrast, over the course of the past two decades, the United States and China have established an extremely high level of economic interdependence. The United States has become dependent on China's willingness to purchase enormous amounts of US Treasury securities (China is presently the world's largest foreign holder of such securities; by June 2013, Beijing was estimated to be holding approximately \$1.28 trillion in US debt) and long-term US economic growth hinges to a considerable extent on American exporters' continued access to the growing Chinese market.⁴¹ Meanwhile, China has become increasingly dependent on America's willingness to import large amounts of Chinese manufactures notwithstanding the PRC's efforts to artificially dampen the value of the yuan to give its exports a competitive edge in the United States. The high and growing level of bilateral economic interdependence will complicate the decision-making calculus in Washington in the event that the People's Liberation Army

exhaustion. Although the burgeoning Sino-US security competition differs markedly from that which pitted the United States against the Soviet Union, the Cold War nevertheless yields crucial grand strategic insights that can be usefully adapted to the present context. By contrast, America's long-standing hegemonic playbook for managing its interests in East Asia has become dangerously anachronistic.

NOTES

1. Although technically, this did not represent a substantive shift in U.S. policy, Obama's announcement was salient because it marked the first time that a sitting U.S. president explicitly extended the U.S. security guarantee to the disputed offshore islands, which are referred to in Japan as the Senkaku and in China as the Diaoyu. The symbolic value of Obama's affirmation was reinforced by the fact that it was articulated by the president in Tokyo during a press conference with Japan's hawkish Prime Minister, Abe Shinzō; Ankit Panda, "Obama: Senkaku's Covered Under US-Japan Security Treaty," *The Diplomat*, April 24, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/obama-senkakus-covered-under-us-japan-security-treaty/>.
2. On the various military initiatives associated with the rebalance, see Mark E. Manyin, Stephen Daggett, Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, Michael F. Martin, Ronald O'Rourke, and Bruce Vaughn, "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing' Toward Asia," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress* R42488, March 28, 2012, 1–5, 10–16; Robert S. Ross, "The Problem With the Pivot," *Foreign Affairs*, (Nov/Dec 2012), 76–79; Ankit Panda, "US-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement Bolsters 'Pivot to Asia'," *The Diplomat*, April 29, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/us-philippines-enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement-bolsters-pivot-to-asia/>; and Ian E. Rinehart, "Malaysia: Background and U.S. Relations," *Congressional Research Service Report*, May 23, 2014, 13–14.
3. Manyin et al., "Pivot to the Pacific?" 20–23.
4. Manyin et al., "Pivot to the Pacific?" 16–19.
5. M. Taylor Fravel, "U.S. Policy Towards the Disputes in the South China Sea Since 1995," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Policy Report*, March 2014, 6–7, <http://taylorfravel.com/documents/research/fravel.2014.RSIS.us.policy.scs.pdf>.
6. Eli Ratner, "Rebalancing to Asia with an Insecure China," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 23.
7. Stephen Harner, "The NYTimes 'China Threat' Myth, the 'Pivot to Asia', And Obama's Foreign Policy Legacy," *Forbes*, June 6, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stephenharner/2014/06/22/the-nytimes-china-threat-myth-the-pivot-to-asia-and-obamas-foreign-policy-legacy/>.

8. Quoted in Justin Logan, "America's Pivot: One Big Contradiction," *The Diplomat*, January 25, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/01/25/contradictions-at-the-heart-of-the-pivot/>.
9. Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China Since 1972* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1992), 27–28.
10. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
11. On the conceptual differences between containment, engagement, estrangement, and appeasement, see Evan Resnick, "Correspondence: Debating British Decisionmaking toward Nazi Germany in the 1930s," *International Security* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 182–188.
12. James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship With China, From Nixon to Bush* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 13–154.
13. On the fundamental contradiction in the United States' post-Cold War hedging strategy towards the PRC, see Justin Logan, "China, America, and the Pivot to Asia," *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, no. 717, Jan. 8, 2013, 1–28.
14. <http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china>.
15. Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1992); Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of U.S.-China Relations, 1989-2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).
16. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 88–144.
17. Robert S. Ross, "The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," in *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy*, eds. Robert A. Art and Patrick M. Cronin (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2003), 229.
18. *Ibid.*, 243–246. In the days following the initial M-9 tests, the PRC proceeded to conduct live-fire air, ground, and naval exercises near Pingtan Island, which lies ten nautical miles from Taiwanese controlled territory.
19. Colonel William Jordan, Lewis M. Stern, and Walter Lohman, "Backgrounder—U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment," *The Heritage Foundation*, No. 2707, July 18, 2012, 3–4, <http://report.heritage.org/bg2707>.
20. David E. Sanger, "U.S. Would Defend Taiwan, Bush Says," *New York Times*, April 26, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/26/world/us-would-defend-taiwan-bush-says.html>.

21. Colonel William Jordan, Lewis M. Stern, and Walter Lohman, "Backgrounder—U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Investing in Strategic Alignment," *The Heritage Foundation*, No. 2707, July 18, 2012, 4–6. Conspicuously, Dung's visit to Washington included a stop at the Pentagon, marking the first time that a Vietnamese leader had visited the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Defense.
22. Quoted in Frederick Z. Brown, "Rapprochement Between Vietnam and the United States," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32, no. 3 (2010): 333.
23. Thomas Lum, "U.S.-Cambodia Relations: Issues for the 113th Congress," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, July 24, 2013, 2.
24. *Ibid.*, 1, 8; Mark E. Manyin, "U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2013: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, July 26, 2013, 22.
25. Quoted in Demetri Sevastolopoulo, "Panetta Makes Symbolic Visit to Vietnam," *Financial Times*, June 3, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e98dd6d4-ad6f-11e1-bb8e-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3DTNWNjA0>.
26. Carlyle A. Thayer, "The Tug of War Over Cambodia," *USNI News*, Feb. 9, 2013, <http://news.usni.org/2013/02/19/the-tug-of-war-over-cambodia>.
27. *Ibid.*
28. M. Tayloer Fravel, "U.S. Policy Towards the Disputes in the South China Sea Since 1995," 4–6.
29. George F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947), 575, 582.
30. Bennett Kovrig, *Of Walls and Bridges: The United States and Eastern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1991).
31. Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). The Soviet Union's general unwillingness to contest the United States in Western Europe or Japan suggests that Moscow was in tacit agreement with Washington as to the acceptable scope of its sphere of influence.
32. On the importance of the challenger's perception of the resolve of the defender to successful deterrence, see Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 523–526.
33. Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

34. Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001), 5–40; Richard K. Betts and Thomas J. Christensen, "China: Getting the Questions Right," *The National Interest* (Winter 2000/2001), 17–29.
35. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
36. In the absence of a security guarantee from the United States, it would be hard to imagine that Japan and the Philippines would have taken highly provocative recent steps to escalate their disputes with China in the East China Sea and South China Sea, respectively. In September 2012, Tokyo defied repeated Chinese warnings by proceeding with the "nationalization" of the three disputed East China Sea islands that Japan did not already own by purchasing them from a private owner. Meanwhile, in February 2013, Manila similarly defied repeated Chinese warnings by filing a request for arbitration against China with a special United Nations tribunal pursuant to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), charging that recent Chinese actions in the South China Sea contravene UNCLOS. On these developments, see <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/babbfa2a-fb2b-11e1-87ae-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3TCSS8iwT>; and <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26781682>.
37. Evan N. Resnick, "Dubious Deterrence in the East China Sea," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Commentary*, June 5, 2014.
38. According to John L. Gaddis, the U.S. alternated between symmetrical and asymmetrical strategies of containment over the course of the Cold War. See John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, Rev. and Expanded Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). On the U.S. efforts to economically weaken the USSR, see Michael Mastanduno, *Economic Containment: CoCom and the Politics of East-West Trade* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).
39. Justin Logan, "China, America, and the Pivot to Asia," *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, no. 717, (Jan. 8, 2013), 9.
40. Michael Mastanduno, *Economic Containment: CoCom and the Politics of East-West Trade* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); John Lewis Gaddis, "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System," in *The Cold War and After: Prospects for Peace, An International Security Reader*, Expanded Ed., eds. Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 13–16.

41. Wayne M. Morrison and Marc Labonte, "China's Holdings of U.S. Securities: Implications for the U.S. Economy," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, August 19, 2013, 1; "U.S.-China Trade Facts," Office of the United States Trade Representative, <http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china>.
42. Domestic interest groups associated with the promotion of expanded economic ties with the PRC, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, can also be expected to lobby the White House and Congress on behalf of non-intervention in a conflict between the PRC and a U.S. ally or partner in the region.
43. James Manicom, "China and American Seapower in East Asia: Is Accommodation Possible?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 3, (2014): 345–371. Relatedly, John Measheimer argues that in maritime East Asia, there is no equivalent of the Central Front in Cold War Germany to "anchor stability." Rather, in Asia there exists a multiplicity of locations where fighting between the United States and PRC could break out, though in each of these places the magnitude of any war would be low compared with one that could have broken out in Central Europe. This in turn suggests that escalation to nuclear warfare is far less likely, which mitigates the peace-inducing effect of nuclear deterrence. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Updated Ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 395–398.
44. *Ibid.*, 114–128. Robert Ross argues that the geopolitics of East Asia are conducive to Sino-U.S. peace because the two states' military power portfolios are complementary, rather than correspondent: the United States is strong in seapower and weak in landpower, while China is strong in landpower and weak in seapower. Thus, the United States will be unable to contest China's sphere of influence in landed East Asia while China will be unable to contest the U.S. sphere of influence in maritime East Asia. Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1999): 99–111.
45. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace," 92–96.