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## The 'Rebalance' and the Dangers of America's Creeping Containment of China

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**Abstract:** *With its 'rebalance' towards the Asia-Pacific region, the United States is in danger of falling into a policy of seeking to contain China's rise rather than to engage with it constructively. In many ways this is an unconscious hang over from the Cold War era and has been reinforced by the apparent centrality of military and maritime, rather than political and economic expressions of interest in the region. This policy will prove counterproductive and is likely to alarm prospective allies and partners in the region. It will increase tensions and could potentially drag the United States into commitments that are not in its interest.*

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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. Critics of this policy, however, have charged that it 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 nevertheless constitutes something of a policy departure. Since the end of the Cold War, successive US administrations have slowly though inexorably expanded the vertical and horizontal scope of the pre-existing military cordon surrounding China; 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. By expanding US defence commitments to states and territories that are marginal to US vital interests yet 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 favour the United States. On this score, it would be instructive for officials of the current administration to 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 West Europe and Northeast Asia that they considered absolutely integral to US national security. If the current administration more carefully aligns its defence commitments with core US geopolitical interests in East Asia, it will more responsibly steer the ship of state between the Scylla of appeasement and the Charybdis of unnecessary and catastrophic war.

### The contours of the rebalance

The Obama Administration unofficially inaugurated the rebalance – which was initially dubbed the 'Pivot' but subsequently rebranded – in a sequence of speeches, announcements and publications by senior officials beginning in late 2011.<sup>1</sup> 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 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 Defence 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.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the United States has ramped up the tempo of joint military exercises with regional allies and strategic partners, including India. Further, it has also restored defence cooperation with New Zealand and Indonesia; has enhanced defence cooperation with Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia; and has proposed such cooperation with Myanmar. Finally, the Pentagon has announced that by 2020, the US Navy will shift from a 50/50 distribution of its capabilities in the Atlantic and Pacific theatres, to a 60/40 split favouring the Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

To some extent, the economic and diplomatic planks of the pivot 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 12 partner states.<sup>4</sup> Diplomatically, the administration has undertaken several moves to enhance the regional profile and influence of the United States. First, it has actively and consistently participated in various multilateral forums, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Second, and relatedly, it has dispatched senior policymakers to the region to attend at a considerably more frequent rate than its immediate predecessors. Third, it has ended the longstanding US policy of estrangement towards Myanmar, and has begun to vigorously engage the reformist regime of Thien Sein.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

## 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 China. According to one American analyst, 'leading Chinese thinkers view [U.S. actions taken as part of the rebalance] as undermining China's security and increasingly believe the unifying rationale for such a seemingly coordinated US approach is to constrain China's rise.'<sup>7</sup> 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.'<sup>8</sup> In response, senior US decision makers have strenuously denied that the pivot/rebalance is a euphemism for a new policy of containing China. Former Secretary of State Clinton rejoined that since China was an economic beneficiary of the regional order that the pivot aimed to perpetuate, the policy could not possibly be targeted at Beijing, while former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta echoed that the pivot 'is not about the containment of China.'<sup>9</sup>

Critics of the rebalance accurately claim both that the policy is aimed at the containment of China and that it represents something of a departure in the US approach towards China, but are off-base in their assertion that the strategy is fundamentally new. In essence, the rebalance is both old and new. On the one hand, it merely perpetuates a broad strategy of military containment of China that has been consistently pursued by all American administrations since the early 1950s. On the other hand, it continues a post-Cold War trend by which successive administrations since the early 1990's have incrementally expanded the containment strategy inherited from the early Cold War period.

All presidents since 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 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. Truman's successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, penned a mutual defence treaty with the Nationalist-led Republic of China (ROC); concluded military alliances with the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand; and

deployed US troops to the region in large numbers.<sup>10</sup> Although the United States abrogated its formal defence 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 Taiwan. 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 China and instead began to actively promote such contacts.<sup>12</sup> For the first two decades or so after the revolution, successive US administrations practised 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 United Nations. 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. Aside from being the first top-level US officials to visit Beijing since the Communist takeover, Nixon and Kissinger also tacitly acquiesced to the admission of China to the United Nations (and the concurrent ejection of Taiwan from that organization), began providing sensitive military intelligence to the Chinese Communist regime and established some bilateral cultural exchanges and commercial ties. This process picked up steam following the advent to power in Beijing of Deng Xiaoping, who espoused an economic policy of expanding trade with the West. In 1978, the two countries formally restored normal diplomatic relations with one another and US president James E. Carter permitted the sale to China of dual-use high-technology goods and non-lethal defence items. Carter's successor, Ronald W. Reagan, acquiesced in the direct sale of US armaments to China.<sup>13</sup>

The US engagement of China 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

Alongside the tremendous expansion of bilateral economic and other contacts that has transpired over the past two decades under the aegis of the engagement component of American policy towards China has been a far more subtle expansion in its containment component. Although all US presidents since Truman have consistently endeavoured to deter Chinese military and geopolitical expansionism, the strength and scope of the US defence cordon surrounding China have grown incrementally since the end of the Cold War, in a process of '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, Obama, has discretely contributed to this process.

Although the (George H. W.) Bush and Clinton Administrations generally pursued a friendly policy of enhanced engagement with China, both also adopted various measures to tighten the US defence perimeter against it. During the summer of 1992, Bush announced the sale of 150 F-16 fighter aircraft to Taiwan. With this decision, Bush reversed a decade-long US refusal to provide Taiwan the cutting-edge F-16s 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.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, in August 1995, the Clinton Administration normalized bilateral diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which set the stage for enhanced defence 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.<sup>18</sup> Also, in March 1996, the White House responded aggressively to China's test-launch of surface-to-surface M-9



ballistic missiles into the waters off Taiwan's coast by deploying two US aircraft carrier battle groups into the waters east of Taiwan.<sup>19</sup>

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 longstanding 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 an April 2001 interview, 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.'<sup>20</sup>

Bush also enhanced defence 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 and Training Program (IMET) and began to sell some non-lethal armaments to Vietnam, while Hanoi slightly loosened previous restrictions on US port visits. Finally, in June 2008, following on the heels of Secretary of Defense Donald 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.<sup>21</sup> On this occasion, Bush conspicuously expressed 'support for Vietnam's national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity'.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, during Bush's second term in office, the United States inaugurated a token IMET program with Cambodia worth \$49,000 and two US warships made port calls to the country.<sup>23</sup>

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 programme 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 Vietnamese Navy and began admitting Vietnamese officers to US staff colleges and

institutions of military education.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> Also, in 2010, the administration effected a 'marked upturn'<sup>26</sup> in bilateral defence relations with Cambodia by permitting Phnom Penh to open a defence 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 counter-terrorism training with their Cambodian counterparts. It also tripled spending on defence cooperation activities with Cambodia, bringing that figure to a total of \$18.2 million.<sup>27</sup>

The Obama Administration's most significant initiative prior to the introduction of the rebalance pertained to the longstanding maritime dispute between China and several of its neighbours, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, regarding the ownership of several uninhabited islands in the South China Sea. During the July 2010 annual meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton articulated a modified US position on the South China Sea dispute, which adopted a more hostile stance towards China. 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.<sup>28</sup>

Since the advent of the rebalance in late 2011, the administration has continued to expand containment in both vertical and horizontal terms. Vertically, it has expanded US military deployments to Australia, South Korea, Singapore and the Philippines, and it has intensified defence cooperation with New Zealand, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Vietnam and Cambodia. Horizontally, it has adopted an increasingly intrusive and confrontational policy towards China in the South and East 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 risks 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 defence 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 China. As the US military cordon around China becomes increasingly constrictive, the balance of interests and resolve between the two countries becomes increasingly favourable to the latter, thereby increasing its likelihood of instigating a conflict. Although the overall balance of military power in the region continues grossly to favour the United States, this advantage will deteriorate to the extent that Washington establishes formal or even informal security commitments to states and issues 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.

A cardinal aspect of US grand strategy during the Cold War was the careful consideration that policymakers devoted to precisely delineating the defence 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 Soviet Union a *de facto* sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Although Moscow permitted some peripheral members of the East Bloc, such as Yugoslavia and Romania, to exercise a modicum of foreign policy autonomy, the Kremlin imposed

tight limits 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. Despite their rhetorical professions to the contrary, successive American administrations effectively acquiesced in 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 in 1956.<sup>29</sup>

By simultaneously appeasing Moscow in Eastern Europe while deterring it from expanding into Western Europe or Japan, the United States drew a deterrent line 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 defence of Western Europe and the 1952 Mutual Security Treaty, which bound it to Japan. These arrangements meant that US policymakers guaranteed the security only of countries whose independence they considered to be absolutely integral to American national security. They ceded control to the Soviets over the belt of countries in Eastern and Central Europe that the Kremlin viewed as integral to Soviet 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 at the hands of Napoleonic France in the previous century, Soviet decision makers were desperate to establish a buffer zone adjacent to the western border of the Soviet Union in order to obstruct or at least slow down any repeat performance by the United States and NATO. By contrast, 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.<sup>30</sup>

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. America's deterrence of the Soviet Union was strengthened not only by the 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 determined 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 catalyse 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.<sup>31</sup>

## Reconceiving containment 2.0 in Asia

In sharp contrast to the containment of the Soviet Union that was practised by the United States during the Cold War, the creeping containment currently being conducted against China by the United States 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 American security commitment to Taiwan was extremely problematic due to China's far greater relative stake in the matter. 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 Chinese sovereignty than their American counterparts feel about ensuring a peaceful resolution of the cross-Strait dispute.<sup>32</sup> Further, the balance of power in the region continues to swing away from the United States and towards China, 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 defence perimeter to the contentious East and South China Seas, as well as to the states of Southeast Asia, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam, which are China's immediate territorial neighbours. 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.<sup>33</sup> 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 manoeuvre through an ever-expanding sphere of influence.

Consequently, American 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, American policymakers must contemplate conciliating some of China's most pressing geopolitical insecurities while simultaneously protecting the foremost interests of the United States and its 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 the Soviet Union after World War II. Nevertheless, in the 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 pivot. This would entail reducing the tempo of military exercises in the region; suspending efforts to militarily engage the Southeast Asian states such as Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar; and imposing a moratorium on arms sales to Taiwan.

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 highly truculent and inflexible negotiating positions, but has also led China to reciprocate, producing a spike in regional tensions. 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 China aimed at resolving their maritime dispute.<sup>34</sup>

A somewhat more judicious, prudent and conciliatory Asia policy on Washington's part would also make sense in the light of pressing domestic political and economic constraints. Not only is the US public suffering from war-fatigue, but defence 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.

## Notes

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## Maritime Asia: A Chinese Perspective

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**Abstract:** *China is in the midst of a substantial economic and military rise in its relative power, although it does not aspire to play a hegemonic or superpower role. Much of this rise is essentially maritime but with this comes apprehensions of vulnerability. China's dependence on energy supplies and other commodities from abroad and its need to export its manufactured goods mean that safe and secure shipping is critical to its peace and prosperity. Because this shipping is especially vulnerable to turbulence in critical choke points such as the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz, China is acutely sensitive to the prospect of disorder and American reactions in these regions. Against this background it needs to develop its maritime power in order to defend its interests.*

Till, Geoffrey (ed.). *The Changing Maritime Scene in Asia: Rising Tensions and Future Strategic Stability*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

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