

Changing Geopolitical Landscape in the Asia-Pacific: Rise of China and the United States' Response

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Abstract

The rise of China has challenged the United States' post-Cold War hegemonic dominance, requiring shifts in U.S. security strategy. A series of Chinese actions have prompted these shifts in the past 20 years, which are identified in this paper. This paper examines how and why the United States has shifted its foreign policy in response to China's rise. It analyzes government documents and research from Western and Chinese perspectives to identify U.S. policy shifts and the rationale behind them. Three significant areas of policy change are highlighted: the United States has expanded its military presence in the Asia-Pacific, strengthened military and economic ties with other countries in the region, and pursued economic independence and security, particularly in the semiconductor industry. These shifts represent a major realignment of U.S. foreign policy away from traditional theatres in Europe and the Middle East towards a focus on the Asia-Pacific. In addition, the relationship between the United States and China will play a critical role in shaping the future stability and structure of the international system.

Keywords:

Foreign Policy, International Relations, Sino-US Relations, Security Policy

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has maintained its place as the uncontested leader of the unipolar world order; however, the economic and military rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has begun to challenge this apparent supremacy. Throughout their history together, the United States and China have had conflicting views on security and borders. Massive economic growth since the 1990s has enabled China to expand its military and global influence to the point where it can now challenge the United States. China has begun to enforce its land claims in South Asia and the South China Sea, and it has signalled that it is willing to enforce its claim on Taiwan as well. During the Cold War, Sino-US relations were fragile but stable. Incidents like the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre created tensions between the two countries, but relations remained stable due to economic benefits and aligned interests against the Soviet Union (Roper, 2024). However, China's recent rise to power and increased aggression has made that more difficult, necessitating changes to US security policy beginning in the 2010s. This paper aims to determine how the United States has adjusted its security policy in response to China's growing power and influence.

Before analyzing changes in US foreign policy, it is important to establish what Chinese actions prompted these changes, as well as the United States' core geopolitical interests in the Asia-Pacific region. This analysis will draw on research from Western and Chinese perspectives. I will then identify the changes made in the past twenty years to US foreign policy in response to the rise of China and analyze why these changes were deemed necessary. I have identified three main areas where the United States modified its foreign policy in response to China's rise: The United States has expanded its military presence in the Asia-Pacific, strengthened military and

economic ties with other countries in the region, and pursued economic independence and security, particularly in the semiconductor industry.

A Divergence of Goals and Ideology

According to a 2024 US Department of Defense report, China views the United States as “deploying a whole-of-government effort to contain and suppress the PRC’s rise, presenting obstacles to its national strategy” (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 1). China’s national strategy emphasizes a series of “core interests,” several of which are at direct odds with international law and the geopolitical interests of the United States. Particularly, its claims in the South China Sea are illegal under international law and conflict with the legal maritime claims of five other sovereign nations. China also maintains illegal land claims against India and Bhutan on its southern border (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 4–19). Additionally, China, a socialist nation, is an ideological opposite of the United States.

China’s views on sovereignty and borders put it at odds with American and Western values of self-determination, freedom, and individualism and have led to conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. China views independence movements in Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong as threats to its own national sovereignty and has pursued aggressive economic and cultural integration policies in these regions (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 6). Beijing is also reluctant to endorse any sanctions or actions that disrupt the status quo, fearing international intervention should it face internal instability (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 15). Additionally, China’s global initiatives are increasingly at odds with those of the United States. As China’s economy has grown, the country has expanded its role in the international governance system, utilizing its positions in the UN Security Council, World Trade Organization, and G-20 to pursue its agenda. The PRC is also a member or founder of numerous regional and global organizations designed to

move the international system away from Western dominance, including BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 14).

Historically, ideological differences between the United States and China have played a relatively insignificant role in Sino-US relations. For decades, China remained a minor power unable to compete with US interests, and co-operation against the Soviet Union proved mutually beneficial (Jie, 2020). Beginning in 2017, the Trump administration framed China as a “revisionist power” and “strategic competitor,” and positioned the rivalry between “free” and “repressive” world orders as a top security concern for the United States (Jie, 2020). While it was the Obama administration that began gradually shifting US foreign policy toward Asia, the Trump administration’s framing of China as a competitor rather than an economic ally brought ideology back to the forefront of Sino-US relations. Additionally, as China has risen as a world power and the differences between US and Chinese world governance strategies have emerged, ideology has begun to play a larger role. China has long opposed the United States’ concept of a liberal international order and its tendency to seek to transform non-democratic states into democracies, but only in recent decades has it been able to offer its own alternative to US influence. The Trump administration sought to prevent China from using its newfound power to establish illiberal spheres of influence in the Asia-Pacific and beyond (Zuo, 2025). As both states exert their influence over the international system, it has become clear that domestic ideologies influence both China’s and the United States’ global governance strategies (Jie, 2020).

Catalysts for Change: Chinese Actions Prompting US Policy Shift

Central to China’s national strategy is the expansion and modernization of its military forces, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). China now maintains the largest active-duty military force in the world, with over two million personnel, as well as the largest navy by number of ships. The

People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has focused on modernizing its surface and submarine forces and has deployed six nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines as part of the PRC's nuclear triad (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 48–52). The PRC has also been expanding and modernizing its nuclear weapons arsenal and is believed to possess over six hundred nuclear warheads (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 102). In addition to expansion, increased aggression by the PLAN and China Coast Guard and the construction of military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea have aggravated tensions between China, its neighbours, and the United States. The PRC also maintains overlapping land claims with India and Bhutan, which have led to deadly skirmishes between the Indian Army and the PLA (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 19). PLA military exercises have also caused tension between the United States and China. For example, China conducted the 2023 Joint Sword exercise in response to Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy. The PLAN also conducts operations within the Exclusive Economic Zones of other countries, including the United States (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 45–8).

China states that the intent of its global initiatives is to make the international system fairer to all, specifically to developing countries (Wu & Li, 2021, pp. 67–8); however, Chinese foreign direct investment and technology-sharing initiatives can create economic and strategic dependencies for China and reduce global reliance on American technology. In particular, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, is intended to expand PRC global outreach by providing foreign investment and completing infrastructure projects in developing countries. The PRC has also used the BRI to pursue economic co-operation with participating countries, moving them away from American influence (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 10–12). China's stated goals for the BRI are to supplement regional development, improve Chinese

industry, and provide an outlet for excess industrial capacity; however, critics accuse China of practising debt-trap diplomacy with impoverished countries unable to repay BRI loans.

Additionally, China's state investment bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, gives out low-interest and zero-cash-payment loans in exchange for resource rights or infrastructure access, giving the Chinese government advantages in negotiations should a country default on its loans. The bank also allows China to circumvent international monetary organizations and regulations, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Many of the countries participating in China's BRI lack credibility on the international stage, limiting their alternatives for foreign investment (Lindley, 2022). To expand its BRI initiatives beyond infrastructure, the PRC created the Digital Silk Road (DSR) initiative, intended to facilitate technology transfer between the PRC and partner countries. Critics of the DSR initiative are concerned that China is creating dependencies on its technology and encouraging the use of PRC technologies for authoritarian governance (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 12–13). In response to increasing BRI initiatives, the United States has also increased its own infrastructure partnerships, particularly in regions of focus for China's BRI. Notably, the 2023 establishment of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor was in direct response to China's BRI initiatives (Zuo, 2025).

Cybersecurity threats originating from the PRC have also raised alarm among US officials. In its 2024 Annual Threat Assessment, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence identified China as the “most active and persistent cyber threat to U.S. Government, private-sector, and critical infrastructure networks” (National Intelligence Council, 2024, p. 11). The first public accusation of Chinese hacking was the “Titan Rain” intrusions into US Department of Defense laboratories between 2003 and 2005. Following this, the frequency of

Chinese cyber-attacks has been increasing since 2011, and they have targeted US government infrastructure as well as major US firms, including a high-profile attack on Google in 2010. Through cyber-attacks, China has also gained access to classified design information on US weapons and missile defense systems (Lindsay, 2015).

At the forefront of Sino-US tensions is the security situation in the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan occupies an extremely strategic location in East Asia. It is situated in the middle of the First Island Chain, a series of islands in East Asia that have proven vital to US defence interests in the Asia-Pacific. A Chinese occupation of Taiwan would limit US military operations in the region and hamper the United States' ability to defend itself and its allies (Sacks, 2023). While China is striving for peaceful reunification with Taiwan, it has stated that it will not allow Taiwan to remain separated from China under any circumstances (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 6). In 2005, Beijing passed the Anti-Secession Law, which set a legal precedent for a military invasion of Taiwan if "secessionist forces" achieve independence and all options for peaceful reunification are exhausted (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 30). Additionally, the PLA has conducted frequent shows of force and military exercises in the Taiwan Strait region over the past two decades, often in response to US or Taiwanese officials engaging in diplomatic talks. These exercises have increased dramatically since a 2022 visit to Taiwan by Nancy Pelosi, signalling Beijing's intent to suppress Taiwanese sovereignty. Following the Pelosi visit, the PLA has shifted its military exercises northward, threatening major population centres like Taipei and demonstrating the PLA's control over the Taiwan Strait (Shattuck, 2023).

US Response: Increased Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific

In 2011, President Barack Obama announced the “Pivot to Asia,” a significant shift in US foreign policy from a focus on the Middle East and Europe to East Asia. With US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan on the decline, the Pentagon shifted the US military presence to Asia in response to threats from China and North Korea. The Obama administration committed 60 per cent of US naval forces to the Indo-Pacific region and redeployed forces no longer needed in Iraq and Afghanistan to other parts of Asia. Although this did not constitute a significant increase above existing force levels, the US military maintains a very strong presence in the region, with over 80,000 American troops in Japan and South Korea alone (Roper, 2024). In response to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, the United States restructured its military deployment from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia and Oceania, increasing the US military presence in Singapore, the Philippines, and Australia. This strategy was bolstered by efforts to fortify allied defence capabilities through bilateral and multilateral agreements, which will be discussed in the following section. The Obama administration’s strategy, which was continued in part by the Trump and Biden administrations, was intended to constrain, encircle, and suppress China on all fronts (De Castro, 2018; Zuo, 2025).

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has been fortifying its military presence in East Asia by building a plethora of military bases along the First Island Chain, consisting of bases in South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States shifted the focus of its operations to preserving shipping lanes vital to the economies of all nations in the region. In the 1990s, China was not viewed as a major threat; however, Chinese encroachment on Taiwan, the last link in the First Island Chain, caused tensions between the United States and China. In 1995 and 1996, China fired ballistic missiles

into the sea near major Taiwanese cities in response to pro-independence movements in the country. US President Bill Clinton responded by sending two carrier strike groups to the vicinity as a contingency and show of force to China. Control over Taiwan would solidify the PRC's dominance over the First Island Chain and hamper US interests in the region. Both China and the United States conduct military operations along the First Island Chain, but Chinese operations have historically been limited to the Yellow, East, and South China Seas. More recently, according to American and Japanese officials, the Chinese threat increased once PLA ships and aircraft began crossing the First Island Chain into the Pacific, which intensified after 2008. A 2010 incident in which a Chinese fishing trawler rammed Japan Coast Guard vessels within Japanese waters sparked tensions between the two nations. This prompted Japan, with the participation of US troops, to stage military drills for the retaking of disputed islands in the East China Sea. In 2014, President Obama declared in a message to China that the islands were covered under a US-Japan defence agreement (Wirth, 2023).

The United States has also bolstered its military relationship with the Philippines in response to China's rise and increased aggression against Filipino vessels in the South China Sea. The United States had withdrawn all forces from the Philippines in 1992 following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but rising tensions with China and the 1995–6 Taiwan Strait Crisis prompted American officials to reconsider the United States' military relationship with the Philippines. In 1998, the United States signed the Visiting Forces Agreement allowing for the rotational presence of American troops in the Philippines. With the threat from China increasing and Filipino democracy stabilizing, the US and Philippine governments signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), providing access to five existing Filipino bases for US troops and allowing the construction of new facilities within the bases. In 2023, the two

countries agreed to incorporate four additional bases into the EDCA (Harding, 2024). Since 1951, the United States has also maintained a mutual defence treaty with the Philippines, which threatens to draw it into any conflict between the Philippines and China over holdings in the South China Sea. In July 2024, President Joe Biden reaffirmed the United States' alliance with the Philippines, legitimizing the mutual defence treaty and committing funds toward the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (US Department of Defense, 2024b).

US Response: Expansion of Alliances with Other Pacific Nations

Perhaps most central to the United States' strategy for countering Chinese influence is the expansion of its alliance network in the Asia-Pacific. The United States has long had partners in Northeast Asian nations like Japan and South Korea, but rising tensions and economic competition with China have resulted in the expansion of the American alliance network southward into Southeast Asia and Oceania. As a part of the Pivot to Asia, the Obama administration pursued a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements with nations in Southeast Asia and Oceania. The United States has maintained a strong military relationship with Australia since the end of the Second World War, but recent Chinese assertiveness has significantly strengthened this partnership. Support for the US-Australia alliance has been almost unwavering since the end of the Cold War, and Australia provided strong support for the Obama administration's Asian pivot. As mentioned in the previous section, the United States also bolstered its alliance with the Philippines in response to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, resulting in the signing of the EDCA agreement in 2014 (Yeo, 2019, pp. 117–48). During the Obama administration, the United States strengthened bilateral agreements with Japan, South Korea, and Thailand while deepening partnerships with non-treaty allied states such as Vietnam,

Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India. It also deepened its unofficial relationship with Taiwan (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

The United States has also pursued multilateral agreements and increased relations with existing organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2008 the United States became the first non-ASEAN country to appoint an ambassador to the association, signalling increased co-operation between the United States and ASEAN nations. By 2011, the United States had opened a permanent mission to ASEAN in Jakarta and had begun participating in the East Asia Summit. Trilateral relations have become important in managing multiple alliances in the Asia-Pacific. Pressured by Japan and Australia, the United States pursued a Trilateral Strategic Dialogue with the two nations starting in 2002. In the post-9/11 era, amid rising tensions with China, Tokyo and Canberra have reiterated their support for continued dialogue between the three nations. The continued Trilateral Strategic Dialogue has strengthened US-Japan and US-Australia bilateral alliances and deepened relations between Australia and Japan, providing stability in the region (Yeo, 2019). Multilateral relations, such as the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, enhance coordination and military interoperability among key allies, which is vital for any future co-operation against China.

Both bilateral and trilateral relationships have facilitated the sale of weapons to Pacific countries, including Taiwan. The United States severed formal diplomatic relations and halted all military aid to Taiwan in 1979 after extending official recognition to the PRC in Beijing. Arms sales to Taiwan continued, and informal relations were maintained through the American Institute in Taiwan. In recent years, however, military aid has resumed. In 2022, Congress passed legislation allowing for the resumption of military aid to Taiwan. This legislation also allowed for Taiwan to receive weapons through American defence stocks, making it the second country

after Ukraine to receive this type of aid. Taiwan has also purchased more than \$50 billion worth of US weapons since 1950, making it the fourth-largest buyer of US weapons, behind only Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Japan (Masters, 2024).

US Response: Bolstering Economic Security

The final major area of US policy change relates to economic security. China's economy has become the second largest in the world, behind only the United States, resulting in competition between the two countries. China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, facilitating economic co-operation, but subsequent security developments have made co-operation more difficult. Taiwan is vital to the global economy, with Taiwanese firms producing nearly 70 per cent of the world's semiconductors and 90 per cent of advanced semiconductors. One firm, TSMC, is responsible for the overwhelming majority of advanced semiconductor manufacturing. Any disruption to Taiwan's position in the global economy would be devastating for the entire world, including the United States and China (Sacks, 2023). In response to Chinese threats against Taiwan, the United States has formed and expanded free trade agreements in the Asia-Pacific and made strides toward domestic semiconductor production to reduce its reliance on Taiwan.

Initially characterized by co-operation, economic relations between China and the US grew increasingly strained after the 2008 global financial crisis, when economic insecurities in both countries arose. In the United States, a common point of contention was the large trade deficit with China, which was cited as an indicator of an unfair economic relationship. China also expressed economic security concerns over the US dollar–dominant monetary system. The final turning point was the Trump administration's 2018 trade war with China, which led to a series of retaliatory tariffs from both nations, resulting in adverse economic effects for both

countries (Bulman, 2021). These tariffs were then left largely intact by the Biden administration. In the era of less-than-co-operative economic relations with China, the United States has pursued free trade agreements with other nations in the region. The number of free trade agreements in the Asia-Pacific has increased dramatically since 2000, with over 150 agreements in effect by 2017, and many more on the horizon. President Obama attempted to strengthen and simplify free trade in the Asia-Pacific through regional trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). However, negotiations for the TPP stalled in Congress, and the remaining nations forged ahead with a new version of the agreement, excluding the United States, and putting future US participation in jeopardy (Yeo, 2019).

To pursue self-sufficiency in the semiconductor industry, Congress passed the CHIPS Act, which authorized \$550 million per year in grants between 2023 and 2027 to support research, design, and manufacturing of semiconductors in the United States. The country is the largest consumer of semiconductors, constituting 46 per cent of the global market; however, US semiconductor manufacturing capacity has eroded since the 1990s. In 1990, it accounted for 37 per cent of global semiconductor manufacturing capacity, compared to only 12 per cent today. This means that the United States relies on foreign countries for most of its semiconductor supply, especially Taiwan for its advanced semiconductors. The White House stated that one of the goals for the CHIPS Act was to “reduce our dependence on critical technologies from China and other vulnerable or overly concentrated foreign supply chains” (Peters, 2022, p. 1644). This puts the CHIPS Act at the core of the effort to secure US economic interests. The passing of the CHIPS Act was intended to help reverse this trend, and early data indicates that the effects, while minimal, are mostly working as intended. A macroeconomic analysis determined that the passing

of the CHIPS Act has slightly weakened China's economy, reduced US imports, and increased US exports. This trend is expected to continue in subsequent years (Gu & Cheong, 2024).

Conclusion

The United States has responded to China's global rise to power through a series of foreign policy initiatives. First, it has expanded its military presence in the Asia-Pacific. Beginning with the Obama administration's 2011 "Pivot to Asia" strategy, military resources were redeployed from Iraq and Afghanistan to Asia. This military repositioning initiative has resulted in strengthened military bases along the First Island Chain and the re-establishment of a US military presence in the Philippines through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. Second, the United States has strengthened its alliance and trade network in the Asia-Pacific, developing a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements to counter Chinese influence in the region. The Obama and Biden administrations deepened military and economic ties with Australia, Japan, and South Korea while forming new partnerships in Southeast Asia and with India. The United States has also deepened its unofficial relationship with Taiwan, continuing weapons sales and renewing military aid. Finally, the United States has pursued economic security measures to reduce reliance on China and other vulnerable nations like Taiwan. Notably, the 2022 CHIPS Act invested in domestic semiconductor manufacturing, representing a shift toward self-sufficiency in an area vulnerable to Chinese influence.

These shifts in foreign policy represent a major strategic realignment for the United States. The country has traditionally been focused on theatres in the Middle East and Europe, so this realignment of focus suggests rising concerns about Chinese political and economic influence through PRC government measures such as the Belt and Road Initiative and Digital Silk Road. The United States pursued these changes to maintain its political and economic

dominance in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. During a 2015 state visit to the United States by Chinese President Xi Jinping, President Barack Obama stated that he welcomes the rise of a China that is “peaceful, stable, prosperous, and a responsible player in international affairs” (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). The relationship between the two countries will likely be a defining feature of the global system for decades to come, with the global rules-based order riding on whether these competing powers can maintain peaceful relations amid their growing rivalry.

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