

A stylized world map composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to represent specific geographical locations.

Is US Security Policy »Pivoting« from the Atlantic to Asia-Pacific?

A Critical Geopolitical Perspective

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- Since the Cold War there has been no single geopolitical template that assigns meaning to world politics. This has led to the search for new geopolitical »structures,« often based on questionable empirical evidence and interpretations. Critical geopolitics is suspicious of such geopolitical narratives and scrutinizes their assumptions and impact on policies.
- The recent debate about a pivoting of US security policy from the trans-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific makes no sense. The notion implies an overstatement of the trans-Atlantic axis and a substantial narrowing of the recent reshaping around the China–US relationship. Recent efforts to replace the term »pivoting« with that of »rebalancing« may more accurately reflect what is taking place.
- The notion of a shift of US security policy towards the Asia-Pacific also risks oversimplification: Experts and politicians should avoid a narrow focus on the bilateral China–US relationship. They must not neglect the complex realities of the region when framing the story about Asia-Pacific in world politics.
- Part of the problem is the overemphasis on Great Powers at the expense of more »lowly« actors. It also reflects an obsession with grand »turning points« in history versus slower transitions. The »surprise« that China, long viewed as »backward« and stuck with a state-based political economy, should have become such an important global actor so quickly makes it a ready candidate for wild speculation uninformed by local knowledge.



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Much has been made by pundits and politicians of the so-called »pivoting« of US security policy and military planning since 2010. The United States has turned towards Asia-Pacific and presumably away from the trans-Atlantic focus that had, on these accounts, previously defined the overall US global geopolitical posture since the 1940s. Magazines such as *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy* have led the rush to see a fundamental geographical shift signaled by what can seem to be much more modest proposals for adjusting US foreign policy in recent speeches by President Barack Obama, speeches and a major article written by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and the new Defense Strategic Guidelines. Exaggerating the scope of this shift fits in with the view popular in the United States that the twenty-first century will be an »Asian Century« (almost entirely because of the economic »rise« of China) and that Europe is destined for global peripheral status as its project of unification falters. American primacy, even if now nervously asserted more than genuinely believed, remains the one certainty in official quarters. The main threat now comes from the Asia-Pacific, hence the need for the geopolitical tilt.

1. Critical Geopolitics

A critical geopolitical perspective is deeply suspicious of such nostrums. The academic field of Geography was scarred badly in the early twentieth century, not least in Germany and Japan, by its association with a geopolitics which provided geographically determinist claims for »pivots« emerging as a result of the coming of the railway, its challenge to sea power, and, as a direct result, control over the steppes of central Asia giving the global geopolitical edge to local land powers. Apart from such idiosyncratic figures as Robert Kaplan in the US, some Eurasianists in Russia, and enthusiasts for Haushofer's Geopolitik in China, reading security policy from physical geography is not central to contemporary discussions about foreign and military policy. But the language of pivoting and the idea of wholesale shifts in the center of gravity of world politics are part of the enduring legacy of classical geopolitical arguments. Beyond that, the practical reasoning involved is based on geographical assumptions and labels that should be investigated rather than simply asserted. The entire narrative about a »shift« in US security policy from the trans-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific world needs close scrutiny.

Critical geopolitics is about providing such scrutiny. Towards the close of the Cold War, some academic geographers and political theorists in a number of countries became concerned about how the Cold War and conflicts that erupted around that time, such as the Contra war in Nicaragua and the first Gulf War, were represented by political elites and in mass culture and how this had affected their character and longevity. The main idea was that »geography« did not have direct effects on foreign-policy making and the dynamics of conflicts, but that these were always practically mediated through the ascription of meaning to places and peoples: from the relative significance of different world regions to »national interests« to the use of metaphors and analogies from other places and times used to communicate and justify given courses of policy and action. Think, for example, of the putative shift in US foreign policy from Europe to the Middle East in the early 1990s and the recycling of »Munich« and »Hitler« analogies in both Gulf Wars.

A specific set of insights characterizes the approach as it has developed since the early 1990s. The first is a conceptual matrix for a geographical analysis of world politics based on ideas about geographical representations and socio-economic resources. This refers, respectively, to how the world is structured geographically from certain geographical »vantage points« and the relative capacity to spread such notions and, if need be, enforce them. Another is an emphasis on the role of vision and geographical imagination in how the world is structured and acted on by political agents of various sorts. Cartographic representations that come into popular use are of particular interest as sources of information about the »nature« of places and the linkages and flows that connect them. A third is how important the fusion between territory and national identity has been in modern nationalism and how its role in dividing up the world still remains at work. So, much geopolitical discourse is not surprisingly directed at maintaining a clear sense of »domestic« difference and superiority. Exceptionalism is the rule. »Our« identity is always at stake in this or that conflict. Finally, I would identify its stress on the elite-based statecraft that has long lain at the heart of geopolitical reasoning and its necessary denial of the multidimensional qualities of different places in pursuit of an overriding Weltpolitik. Thus, »foreign« places lose their rich physical-cultural character as they are »plugged in« to overriding geostrategies that reflect the narrow

security and economic objectives of dominant groups in national politics. Critical geopolitics resists the tendency to separate out the »domestic« and the »foreign« or »international« as separate realms. They are in fact completely bonded together.

For policymakers, particularly in countries other than those where the scripts of global geopolitics are first written, there are a number of analytic virtues to the approach. One is to encourage a suspicion of grand geopolitical narratives based on relatively limited textual sources that fit into the overall Zeitgeist. Another is to beware of beguiling metaphors and terms such as »pivoting« that provide the simple language and sound bites that are the stock-in-trade of contemporary politics. Like advertising jingles, they bamboozle even as they seem to clarify. A third is to link new geopolitical narratives to the anxieties of domestic politics from where they often emanate. In other words, why did this discussion and the way it is posed arise now rather than previously and how does this relate to the electoral cycle, elite succession or dominant issues in domestic politics? Finally, what are the historical resources upon which the narrative effectively relies? What I have in mind here are the map images, place stereotypes, and cultural attributes inherited from accounts of the past that inform the narrative. How are these mobilized and to what effect?

2. The Trans-Atlantic Starting Point

The »pivoting« narrative relies on a seemingly solid geopolitical starting point: that hitherto US security policy was oriented to containment of and competition with the former Soviet Union and that this in turn was anchored in the US relationship with Western Europe. Of course, after 1991 this orientation had weakened somewhat as a result of the very success of this security policy but had not fundamentally shifted the focus of US foreign and military policies. The terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 pushed the focus of the Bush Administration eastwards to Afghanistan and Iraq because of the way that it construed those attacks. Even then, NATO was the main instrument for the war in Afghanistan although the US invasion of Iraq divided the US from many of its European allies.

There is obviously some basis to this storyline. The Cold War mentality has not entirely disappeared from US foreign policy. This is not surprising given the fact that few

people anywhere ever expected it to end. In addition, the weakness of the European Union in creating its own foreign policy left the default of a certain residual attachment to the US. Of course, the presidency of Vladimir Putin has helped keep the trans-Atlantic focus on life support. Beyond this, however, the purported starting point claim has a number of problems. The first is that it presumes that during the Cold War US governments had a singular focus on Europe. This was by no means the case: from the Korean War and through the Vietnam War and down to the various conflicts in Central America, the Caribbean, and Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, the Cold War tended to go »hot« in places at some distance from Europe. The US alliances with Japan and South Korea suggest that China has long loomed large in US foreign and military policy.

There is also an idealization of a supposedly »united« trans-Atlantic world suddenly challenged by a rift as the US gaze moves elsewhere. Even before the Bush Administration essentially abandoned any sort of multilateral geopolitical strategy based in the North Atlantic Alliance in relation to global terrorist networks, the trans-Atlantic alliance had taken on a mythic quality. Not only had France long ago gone its own way, but the Cruise-missile siting crisis of the 1980s and the process of extending NATO membership to former Soviet/Russian allies in the 1990s had opened up serious seams in the alliance. Rhetorically healed by Barack Obama in 2008, many of these seams have long been well beyond substantive repair.

Finally, the end of the Cold War encouraged a triumphal attitude in Washington towards hitherto valued allies. If the allies put down the Soviet collapse to the exhaustion of the Soviet political-economic model, in the US it was seen as a victory for its model. Pronouncements about a »New World Order« based on a »Unipolar World« reflected this sense of a completely new global regime. Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, not only did this lead to increased tension between the US and its European allies but also to a US foreign policy increasingly driven by domestic political concerns. These related to, among other places, Israel, India, and Cuba, and to issues such as loss of manufacturing industry, immigration, oil supplies, human rights, and elections, rather than to any overriding geopolitical strategy. A patchwork quilt of distinctive foreign policies towards different parts of the world became the effective leitmotif of the New World

Order. Absent the Soviet threat, foreign allies could drift away, and domestic politics could no longer be as readily contained by a common fear of an ideological foe.

The idea of a stable trans-Atlantic focus to US foreign policy before a recent tilt to Asia-Pacific, therefore, is seriously misleading.

3. The Supposed Pivot to Asia-Pacific

Following on from speeches by President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2011), the latter provided a substantive written argument for a reorientation of US foreign policy away from Iraq and Afghanistan towards Asia-Pacific. Europe appears substantively only three paragraphs from the end where it is referred to as »vitally important,« »home to most of our allies,« »partner of first resort,« and so on. Yet, the article is titled »America's Pacific Century,« so a cursory review or skim could give the impression of a dramatic turning point. Perhaps the crux of the article in the present context lies about one-third of the way in where Secretary Clinton writes: »By virtue of our unique geography, the United States is both an Atlantic and a Pacific power. We are proud of our European partnerships and all that they deliver. Our challenge is to build a web of partnerships and institutions across the Pacific that is as durable and as consistent with American interests and values as the web we have built across the Atlantic. That is the touchstone of our efforts in all these areas.«

The proposal, then, is to give some geopolitical shape to US foreign policy beyond the »global war on terror« of the Bush years and the previous counterpunching approach of an Obama Administration facing down the worst global economic crisis since the 1930s. Interestingly, China is not singled out for much particular attention. Indeed, the tone of the piece requires China to be included along with other Asian countries in broad statements such as, with respect to Asia-Pacific, »It is home to several of our key allies and emerging powers like China, India, and Indonesia« and »One of the most prominent of our emerging partners is, of course, China.« At the same time, the article emphasizes the role of existing alliances with Japan, Australia, and other countries: »They have underwritten regional peace and security for more than half a century, shaping the environment for the region's remarkable economic ascent.

They leverage our regional presence and enhance our regional leadership at a time of evolving security challenges.«

In her first sentence, however, Secretary Clinton does use the term »pivot point« to describe the winding down of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the need to pay renewed attention to Asia-Pacific. Much of the commentary misses this fairly specific use of the term »pivot« without any reference to Europe or the Atlantic world. Furthermore, commentators also gave Secretary Clinton's argument (and the supposed geopolitical reorientation »behind it«) an emphasis, at least on my reading, that it lacks: that Asia-Pacific is really code for China and that this focus on China involves reinforcing existing regional alliances to »contain« China.

Since writing the article, Secretary Clinton has seemingly been more oriented towards China than the article would lead one to expect. Her trips to China's neighboring countries and to Africa in summer 2012 have resulted in speeches that have been much more critical of Chinese economic and foreign policies than the »pivoting« speeches and the article examined previously ever were. Arguably, this reflects the electoral cycle in the US and the presumed role of China's economic development in US economic decline. But does it speak to a fundamental geopolitical reorientation of US security policy?

Two pieces of evidence can be used to give this interpretation. One is the increasingly combative tone towards China in US domestic politics. The 2012 Republican Party presidential primaries, for example, were filled with China bashing. From this viewpoint, China is, among other things, a »currency manipulator,« a »thief« of intellectual property, a source of »cyber-terrorism,« and guilty of »predatory« pricing. Candidates promise all sorts of retribution if elected. Not surprisingly, this affects the entire tone of US politics towards China. The second is the Pentagon's new (or sort of new) »AirSea Battle« strategy towards Asia, geared specifically to denying huge swaths of ocean to potential adversaries. China is nowhere named in the documents associated with this plan. The plan's naming, of course, brings to mind the famous 1980s US predecessor plan for Europe: »AirLand Battle,« intended to meet Soviet forces if they invaded Western Europe. It is simple extrapolation to see this as one plan replacing the other after the Iraq-Afghanistan interlude.

Three points indicative of a less dramatic interpretation need to be borne in mind. The first is that hyperbole has long characterized the American view of China in both positive and negative registers. The volume of such hyperbole increases at election time to distract attention from the role of US capital and multinational businesses in hollowing out the US economy and priming the pump of Chinese export-led economic growth. In the nineteenth century, China was seen as a »frontier« for US missionaries and businesses because no single European power had conquered it. Films like »Oil for the Lamps of China« in the early 1930s presented China as a huge potential market for US goods. When China was »lost« to Communism in 1949, there was hell to pay for those Americans who had betrayed its destiny. So, more recently the pendulum has swung the other way because instead of being a dependent or supplicant, China has become a major supplier of consumer goods to the United States and creditor for the US government. This strategy helps to identify a foreign entity against which to articulate America's continuing »difference« and exceptional identity.

The second point is that the US has done little to shift around its military assets. So far at least there has been no reorientation of military forces towards »AirSea Battle«. This reflects the fact that in real terms China is still a relatively minor sea power compared to the US. It also is revealing of the fact that the US has long had China contained militarily through its alliances from Japan and South Korea to the north, and to Thailand and the Philippines in the south. From this perspective, »AirSea Battle« is a paper formalization of a fait accompli.

Third, and finally, the Chinese government is not the singular actor that so much of the discourse about »pivoting« alleges. A plurality of »visions« and articulations of foreign policy are at work in China as in the US and elsewhere. Secretary Clinton's original formulation implicitly captures this point. Apart from the question of Taiwan's status, Chinese governments have never officially identified any specific foreign policy orientation other than banally safeguarding »the interests of sovereignty, security, and development.« There is certainly no Chinese Grand Strategy in evidence beyond a single-minded focus on national economic development. In a recent 2012 article, I argue that at least four distinct narratives are in competition among Chinese elites: the Pacific Rim, the Orientalist, the nationalist *geopolitik*, and international

relations with Chinese characteristics. The focus on the three goals of sovereignty, security, and development is precisely the »interest« that Secretary Clinton identifies as potentially mutual rather than competitive between the US and China. Within China today a number of narratives drawing on Chinese historical experience could serve as potential templates for a coherent foreign policy but none of these, save perhaps the Orientalist one which emphasizes China's victimization and humiliation at the hands of foreigners in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, currently has much official or popular resonance. This privileges defense of territorial sovereignty and the integrity of China's borders, essentially defensive orientations, over anything particularly expansive.

4. Blind Spots

The appeal of totalistic turning points has not dissipated. Just as the English geographer Halford Mackinder in 1905 saw the coming of the railway as totally upending the »Columbian Age« in which naval power had allowed European empires to subjugate the rim of Eurasia, so today with the seemingly irreversible and unending »rise« of China within the world economy, the relatively modest proposal of the Obama Administration to provide a better »shape« to a foreign policy has been interpreted as signaling a much more profound reorientation of US foreign policy. Secretary Clinton's most recent speeches have tended to reinforce this over-identification of Asia-Pacific with China, when restating the original formulation and clarifying the continuities in US policy would have served to communicate better with both domestic and foreign constituencies.

The economic and cultural instability of the global present encourages a burgeoning community of geopolitical seers. Since the end of the Cold War there has been no single geopolitical template that assigns meaning to world politics. Allied to the effects of globalization and the revolution of rising expectations around the world this has led to the search for new geopolitical »structures« to give meaning and direct policies. That these are often based on slim empirical evidence and simple-minded interpretations is no bar to their proliferation. The world is a much messier and more complex place than the available frameworks tend to presume.

The idea that world politics is driven by Great Powers and all other actors are only their pawns needs challenging. The narrow focus on the bilateral relationship between China and the US in the »pivoting« narrative removes all of the other actors, such as China's neighboring states and global organizations, alliances, regulatory agencies, and businesses, from the story about Asia-Pacific in relation to world politics as a whole. Banks operating between China and the US, for example, play an important role in political as well as economic relations. Increasingly, small states such as North Korea seem to drive policy responses from other actors, including Great Powers, rather than vice versa.

The term Asia-Pacific lends itself to the refocus around bilateral relationships such as the US-China one because it is not readily defined in a coherent theoretical manner except for linking the US to Asia. One of the weaknesses of the term »Pacific Rim,« popular in the 1990s, was a similar vacuity. It at least had the virtue of embedding China into its immediate geopolitical milieu and emphasized the importance of Chinese diasporas in Chinese politics. The term Asia-Pacific seems to serve primarily to anchor the United States in Asia by using the trans-Pacific connection in a manner similar to how the trans-Atlantic links the US to Europe. Asia-Pacific is not a term with much academic tradition behind it. It seems to derive from usage in APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Community) and the US Pacific Command's usage in the title of its center for security studies in Honolulu.

The seemingly sudden explosion of China as an »emerging« Great Power runs up against the historic tendency in the US (and in Europe) to see China (and Asia in general) as eternally backward and quintessentially despotic. These cultural images need serious revision. Although hyperbole about »opening up« China was a powerful refrain beginning in late-nineteenth century America, negative cultural stereotypes have long characterized China as static, backward, or immobile. The incredible rapid growth of China since the 1980s contradicts the cultural explanations of economic growth favored by Americans, particularly given that the state has played such a key role. This contrasts with the popular US view, not necessarily very accurate, that economies grow best when left to the »magic of the marketplace.« Paralleling the static image of Chinese economy and society has been its strong association with the political tradition of »oriental despotism.« The image of China as governed

by a succession of despotic regimes without internal disagreements still operates powerfully within Washington and in other Western capitals. Notwithstanding the autocratic imperatives of the current and previous regimes, however, they have always run up against factionalism, power struggles and competing narratives about the best direction for the country. Foreign geopolitical positions based on a totalitarian conception of the Chinese state completely miss the fact that different government agencies and political factions within China often take distinctively different viewpoints about such issues as territorial disputes, UN votes, and economic decisions. Outcomes are not always very predictable.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The idea of a pivoting of US foreign policy from the trans-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific over the past few years makes no sense. I have deconstructed the two main elements in the argument: an overstatement of a formerly dominant trans-Atlantic axis to US foreign policy added to a substantial narrowing of the Obama Administration's reshaping of US foreign policy around the bilateral China-US relationship. I compare this to the »clean break« geopolitical hyperbole characteristic of the early twentieth century. But there are a series of other »blind spots« that mar the pivoting narrative. These reflect the search for meaning and insight at a time of global instability, the diminution of the role of actors other than putative Great Powers, and the difficulty of fitting China in particular, and Asia in general, into a cultural matrix that has always seen them as backward and despotic compared to an enlightened and developed West.

From this viewpoint, there are a number of immediate implications for how better to think about current US security policy, particularly in relation to China and Asia. The first is to recognize that the US government is not alone in the world as an »exceptional« actor but is faced with a complex array of other actors with overlapping identities and interests. Second, the world is in a period of change in which military and economic power simply do not overlap in the ways they once did, and the world is less territorially organized, particularly in financial and cultural respects, than at any time since the eighteenth century. Proponents of seeing the world as increasingly organized around a world-city system tap into this



conception of the contemporary world. Third, foreign policy rhetoric is increasingly hostage to domestic political considerations. Fourth, foreign policy making around the world is increasingly labile because of the range of actors now involved and the scope of the issues addressed. Security discourse is no longer confined to moving aircraft carriers and setting out war plans. Economic and financial concerns can no longer simply be dismissed as secondary. Fifth, and finally, we need to put behind us the geopolitical imagination that divides the world into civilized and barbarian, backward and modern. These designations were always more ideological than empirical. They are now positively misleading and dangerous whether expressed by US, Chinese or any other governments.



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