
Modelling Complexity

International Relations discourses bear rich seams of theoretical foundational frameworks on which narrative edifices usually stand. During the Cold War, when adversarial *great-powers* and their supporting *blocs* appeared to be perennially poised on the brink of catastrophic conflict, *realism* gained ground among national security establishments ruling dominant states. Grounded in the postulate that its practitioners perceived the world as it really was, an agglomeration of selfish Westphalian state-actors pursuing narrow self-aggrandising interests, without a central authority to moderate such Hobbesian tendencies, a world where the strong did what they wished and the weak did what they could to defend themselves, *realist* frameworks rationalised, if they did not breed, competitive policies.

Liberals, in contrast, rejected the view that the selfish pursuit of self-interest was the epitome of human cognitive evolution. Pursuing a Kantian perspective of collaborative approaches to shared challenges and opportunities, they pushed a collegial line as an organising principle in both domestic politics and international relations. For much of the period, *liberalism* was largely associated with scholastic visionaries seeking to challenge practitioners with alternative concepts of the possibilities of managing interstate relations. However, even many leaders of post-colonial successor-states who refused openly to align themselves to either bloc of *realism*-driven competitors, preferring instead to form a *non-aligned* coalition, mixed liberal rhetoric with realist praxis.

The sum total of inter-state relations and relational dynamics, often summarised as the *international system*, was visualised as a series of concentric circles, spreading outward from a geopolitical power-centre, to cover the planet. At its heart reposed the *dominant system*, a constellation of the world's *great powers*, inheriting their leading status from their victory in World War II. The *dominant system* itself radiated outward from the *systemic core*, a bipolar-binary construct comprising two adversarial *superpowers*, the United States and the Soviet Union, located at the peak of the global *power-hierarchy*. Their power, i.e., their capacity to promote

favourable changes and prevent unwanted changes to the security environment, alongside their expansive interests and ambitions, so surpassed those of all others that they comprised a category unto themselves. This binary core was perceptibly driven, defined and shaped by an existential, zero-sum, *strategic competition* for global influence, if not control. As the *superpowers* threatened each other with cataclysmic thermonuclear devastation, should respective *core interests* be challenged, both were mutually *deterred* from initiating direct conflict.

Beyond the *core*, the system comprised *subordinate systems* aggregating *regional sub-systems*, geopolitical contrivances devised by academics and practitioners for ease of reference, policy-making and resource allocation within a competitive milieu. These constructs simplified complexities of the global political reality to the extent that formulaic application of these frameworks to policies addressing specific objectives guaranteed only partial success. The *subordinate*- and *sub-systems*, too, comprised competitive and cooperative elements, with some actors gaining from *patron-client networks* fashioned by the rival *superpowers* while others, at least formally, retained *non-aligned* independence of action. Patron–client relations were usually formalised as *alliances*, generically described as *intrusive systems*, linking the systemic *core* to the *periphery*. As many of the *non-aligned* states were, in fact, tacit clients of either superpower, *intrusive systems* divided most of the planetary polity into rival camps. Since the *superpowers* desisted from direct conflict, their competition found expression in proxy-warfare among peripheral rival clients, whose ability to manage their local/regional disputes was eroded as *systemic-subsystemic* resonances deepened cleavages, raised stakes and intensified violence.

Strategists, officials and hordes of analysts on both shores of the Atlantic devised and perennially refined in exquisite detail conceptual paradigms, policy moves and counter-moves to ensure their side of the contention secured whatever advantage the dynamic competitive dialectic permitted the rivals to gain, consolidate and advance. Since both parties pursued this goal continually, peace secured with *Mutual Assured Destruction*, conceived after *massive retaliation* lost popularity, was perpetually precarious. This only changed when Soviet leaders, acknowledging after four decades the futility of unsustainable competition, changed course, before being swept away as the eviscerated Soviet Union fissioned into 15 fragile republics.

The end of the Cold War transformed the strategic landscape and shifted paradigms. With its only peer-rival removed from contention, the United States emerged as the *sole superpower*, the solitary *core* of a *unipolar system*. As no challenger questioned America's authority, this transition from a bipolar- to a unipolar core was largely untroubled. For many secondary and tertiary actors, in contrast, reorganising their domestic order and external relations simultaneously proved more traumatic. Some descended into civil-war, attracting external intervention with a view to restoring peace. But at the *systemic core*, unchallenged success bred a belief in the new order's indefinite immutability. For over a decade, the *system-manager* exercised *hegemonic power* in pursuit of its national interests, which were now seemingly reasonably conflated with global peace and stability.

With fears of unpredictable but presumably semi-imminent and cataclysmic nuclear exchanges lifted, governmental focus in both the *dominant* and *subordinate systems* shifted to more urgent issues nearer home. This perceptual transformation allowed a dissipation of the starkly competitive ardour hitherto colouring national security policy-making in most *dominant-system* capitals.

The US-led liberal order's pre-eminence following the Soviet empire's dissolution, fragmentation and transmogrification, and consequences of parallel changes in the periphery, unleashed forces which transformed the planetary political-economic-commercial landscape. The direction of resource-flows changed from the West to the East, and from the North to the South. This process, eroding the systemic core's visibly unipolar attributes, triggered a gradual, mostly non-violent and possibly irreversible transition. However, by 2015, the *core* had not assumed definable contours of either an *adversarial bipolarity*, or a *binary condominium*. Nor had the system become definably *multipolar*, although aspects of all three paradigms became discernible. The post-Cold War dispensation had eroded but no new equilibrium had been established. The redistribution of resources, resultant transfers of power-capabilities and consequent changes in the global power-hierarchy precipitated *systemic transitional fluidity* noticeably since the late 1990s when the US national security establishment began identifying China as a *near-peer-rival* meriting close scrutiny. China denied hostile intent but responded in kind.

The defence of the US-led *liberal* order, ironically, was thought to demand *realist* conduct of the starkest nature as great-powers increasingly urged restraint on everyone else while themselves preparing for the application of massive force when diplomacy was not, or no longer, considered useful. Nonetheless, reality proved to be more complex than a monochromatic adherence to either school would suggest. As actors began to again rely on coercive deterrence to cope with the uncertainties triggered by *systemic transitional fluidity*, many of them, as members of multilateral institutions, also ceded elements of individual sovereignty, accepting instead institutionalised collective sovereignty, if only partially and reluctantly. The evolution of the European Union offered a model for other historically disputatious *subordinate systems*, but the fallout from the 2008–2010 Great Recession seemed to render wider acceptance and replication of this model momentarily moot.

Power in the post-Cold War-era moved both horizontally and vertically, complicating efforts to comprehend the complexity of this twin-pronged transformation, and confounding attempts to fashion effective responses. Power shifted horizontally from *developed* members of the *dominant system* to *emerging economies* within various *subordinate systems*, most prominently China, but also Russia, India, Brazil, as well as several hitherto tertiary actors, e.g., Turkey, Indonesia, Mexico and South Africa. Most of these states were either allied to or aligned with America, or moving in that direction. So, in most cases, *power-shift* did not appear threatening to members of the erstwhile *dominant system*. The latter, after all, were almost equally concerned with the parallel process of vertical *power-diffusion* from states to increasingly active non-state, sub-state and supra-state

actors. Supra-state organisations e.g., the UN, especially the UNSC, other UN organs, the World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank, the WTO, and similar bodies, often backed with US resources, expanded their influence over *developing* states seeking their help. Although sometimes considered unresponsive to acute human needs in the pursuit of their liberalising missions, intrusions by these bodies were not perceived as fundamentally threatening.

State authority, expressed in a palimpsest of sovereignty-based legal and regulatory regimes marking inter-state boundaries, was additionally and increasingly eroded by more malign sub-state actors, e.g., international crime syndicates, money-launderers, human-traffickers, arms-traders, WMD-proliferators and terrorist groups. Operating across state-boundaries with newly-acquired freedoms, they challenged state-sovereignty in ways that could not meaningfully be countered with either conventional might or nuclear-armed military forces. Rapidly developing information-and-communication technology and ubiquitous devices armed with it allowed myriad groups, ranging from separatist guerrillas and terrorist organisations to socio-cultural networks and citizens' collectives, to organise and operate more cohesively than before. This enabled them to demand and often secure autonomous space both within the states in which they were active, and beyond. In short, in the post-Cold War world, the number and categories of actors with a capacity to effect or prevent change multiplied dramatically.

An additional source of trouble for sovereign state-power resided in *transnational challenges*, some natural and others man-made. Global economic interdependence underscored the need for collaborative responses to the Great Recession. Global warming/climate change, pandemics like Ebola and SARS, internal wars in fragile states such as Syria, Libya, Congo and Sudan, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, state-collapse and the spread of violent extremism exemplified other challenges no one actor, however powerful, could address alone. Faced with the combined consequences of these trends and processes, the state's relative autonomy, its monopoly of organised violence, and capacity to marshal a unifying meta-narrative subordinating all *local/parochial* sub-narratives, declined. As the nature and effect of power *within* the state changed, so did the nature and effect of *interstate* power within the international system. The simultaneity of *power-shift* and *power-diffusion* thus altered both the *state-society interface* and the *inter-state ecology* in ways that are apparently still not entirely clear to those responsible for managing change.

Systemic fluidity generated transitional uncertainties, pushing and pulling secondary and tertiary actors in contrary directions. Economic interests often urged close ties to China, for instance, while strategic insecurity forged closer links to America. In the post-Cold War period, as many component-states began asserting their individual identities, most *subordinate systems* declined in significance in strategic discourse. In contrast, *regional subsystems* acquired a higher profile as potential *hot-spots* and fault-lines between contending interests pursued by the status-quo oriented systemic primate, and its existentially and presumably revisionist 'near-peer competitor'. Since the 1990s, the West-Pacific *subordinate-system*, comprising North-Asian, East Asian and Southeast Asian *sub-systems*, as the focal

point of Sino-US contention, attracted global attention. The competitive-cooperative but otherwise unstated and still-evolving Sino-US diarchy, with its competitive character only generally acknowledged in official commentary, either precipitated numerous *security complexes* or profoundly affected incipient or pre-existing ones. While America and China, powers at the *core* of the evolving system, sought to avoid *incidents* between their armed forces escalating to *confrontations*, their endorsement of, or support for, the actions of their clients within Asia-Pacific *security complexes* and, occasionally, their own participation in certain regional *security complexes*, lowered the bar for and raised the prospects of such escalation, with potentially combustible consequences.

Security complexes are relational dynamics linking two or more actors whose mutual antipathy or, in rare cases, mutual dependence, is so strong that this mutuality trumps their separate relationships with other players. In a constellation of five hypothetical actors named A, B, C, D and E, for instance, binary relations link A-B, A-C, A-D, A-E, B-C, B-D, B-E, C-D, C-E, and D-E. If the A-B linkage was more influential to both A and B in shaping both their mutual policies and policies towards the constellation's other components, then A-B could be described as a binary *security complex*. Sino-US relations can, as this study will demonstrate, reasonably be described as a binary *security complex*. While it has the most incendiary potential from a global security perspective, US and Chinese leaders have, until 2015, managed its evolution in a broadly non-violent fashion. The same cannot be said of their handling of other West Pacific *security complexes*. In a way, this trend recalls the Cold War era, when mutually deterred by the risk of catastrophic nuclear exchanges, rival *superpowers* transmitted their competitive impulses to peripheral actors waging proxy-conflicts. Key binary *security complexes* simmering across the wider Asia-Pacific region, aside from and around the core Sino-US dynamic, are China–Japan, South Korea–North Korea, and China–India.

Two adversarial powers struggling with their contradictions pose a difficult enough challenge. When a third actor enters the fray, the binary complex precipitates a *strategic triangle* which, owing to the added complexity of permutations and combinations of antagonistic action and the increased probability of misperception and miscalculation, further complicates the management of mutual insecurity. While a handful of *strategic triangles* in the Asia-Pacific region are *congruent*, meaning their component actors are closely cooperative in pursuit of shared interests and consonant policies, most are *competitive*. The US–Japan–ROK, US–Japan–India, US–Japan–Australia and Japan–Australia–India relational dynamics exemplify *congruent strategic triangles*. In contrast, US–Japan–China, US–ROK–DPRK, China–DPRK–ROK, China–DPRK–US, Japan–ROK–DPRK, US–China–India, and US–China–Australia are instances of *competitive strategic triangles*. With maritime/territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) acquiring a high profile, the China–Vietnam–US and China–Philippines–US relational dynamics, too, instance *competitive strategic triangles*. The simultaneity of formation/activation, temporal–spatial proximity, and potentially inflammable interactions, of *competitive strategic triangles* threaten regional peace by

explosively detonating Sino-US competition. While this broadbrush generalisation sidesteps such particularities as Japan–ROK tensions or China–DPRK differences, the above outline illuminates the contours of the conflictual paradigms informing this empirical examination of the region’s strategic reality.

The work recognises structural complexity generated by the multiplicity of actors, their interactions and consequent growth in variables collectively shaping intra- and interstate forces and processes, and the challenges confronting the grasp and management of their line-crossing interactive dynamics. It acknowledges cognitive and institutional frailties hindering efforts to predict second- and third-order consequences of policy-action, and the moral ambiguity inherent in politics, but takes no value-judgemental stance. Given the still imposing, but not exclusive, locus of state-actors within the *international system*, the perspective informing this study is *realist*. But for the reasons explained above, especially the increasing import of state-non-state interactions, rising profile of multilateral institutions in addressing trans-border issues, and instances of voluntary if partial cession of state-sovereignty to pooled or collective sovereignty, as in alliances and coalitions, this work views Sino-US strategic competition and its systemic backdrop of *transitional fluidity* through a prism best described as *pragmatic realism*, an adaptation which, while acknowledging changes reshaping the global political-economic landscape, ascribes no normative attributes to the actors reviewed here.

What Transition?

The collapse of an eviscerated Soviet Union, which fissioned into 15 fragile republics at the end of 1991, ended systemic bipolarity. In the absence of another power able or willing to challenge the United States, now the ‘sole superpower’, this development precipitated structural unipolarity. The George W.H. Bush Administration’s 1992 *Defense Planning Guidance* aimed America’s grand strategy at maintaining US hegemony by applying overwhelming military power to prevent the rise of any rival player in Europe or Asia [1]. To sustain ‘the vital political and economic relationship’ America had ‘along the Pacific rim, we must maintain our status as a military power of the first magnitude,’ enabling America to act as ‘a balancing force and prevent emergence of a vacuum or a regional hegemon’ [2]. President Bush formalised the framework:

A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and preeminent superpower: the United States of America. And they regard this with no dread. For the world trusts us with power—and the world is right. They trust us to be fair and restrained; they trust us to be on the side of decency. They trust us to do what’s right [3].

President Bill Clinton toned down America’s hegemonic rhetoric without changing the policy [4]. President George W. Bush built on that legacy with a normative veneer: ‘The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better’

[5]. Improvement would be effected with America's overwhelming economic, scientific-technological and military dominance. America 'must build and maintain' its 'defenses beyond challenge.' To that end, it must 'dissuade future competition; deter threats against US interests, allies, and friends; and decisively defeat any adversary if deterrence fails' [6]. America would ensure other states had 'no hope of surpassing, or equalling, the power of the United States,' the first overt policy-statement envisaging the indefinite extension of America's primacy [7]. The pursuit of this goal to its logical conclusion demanded attacking all perceived peer-rivals or 'near-peer-rivals', threatening America, as happened with preceding hegemons, with imperial overstretch [8]. Successive US administrations either ignored this risk or rejected its validity on the ground that challenging US primacy would impose prohibitive costs, America did not directly threaten other major powers and, as a liberal-democracy, America's benevolent hegemony produced universal benefits [9].

Clinton and his successors pursued this grand-strategic objective of perpetuating America's 'benevolent hegemony' founded on its military-scientific-economic supremacy. Each Administration focused on specific emphases shaped by its ideological moorings and domestic-political priorities and preferences, and external developments, but the fundamental drive to retain, indeed advance, America's power-preponderance coloured national security-related policy-prescriptions and resource-allocation decisions. All administrations stressed America's 'global leadership', pledging to sustain and strengthen it using military force, economic inducements and diplomacy, adapting it to suit changed circumstances; none offered to reduce America's systemic dominance. Although Republicans and Democrats presented subtly nuanced visions of the world and the nature of America's role in it, even the most liberal of administrations noted the planetary nature of America's interests and, notwithstanding increasingly intense interdependence in a globalised world, emphasised an unquestioning assumption of the immutability of America's hegemony [10].

Concerns over systemic transitional fluidity did not originate in response to China's 'rise'. America's post-Cold War expansionist endeavours, in contrast, led some scholars to predict possibly adverse long-term consequences. In the late-1980s, with the Soviet Union ensnared in costly campaigns supporting local allies against rivals receiving covert Sino-US assistance in Africa, Central America and Asia, notably in Afghanistan, America's systemic role and capacity gained significantly. The Reagan Administration expanded America's defence-technological capabilities and reaped benefits from deepening clandestine Sino-US collaboration. Although US forces were not deployed in open combat, the impression of a weakening Soviet Union under the pragmatic reformist Mikhail Gorbachev, and America's relative ascendancy within the bipolar framework, was widely acknowledged. The Soviet Union's subsequent fragmentation and the end of the Cold War led to the eminence of the 'American unipolarity era' school.

And yet, a review of the cyclical rise, consolidation and decline of successive great powers of hegemonic stature over the past five centuries suggested the United States could face the same fate as had befallen preceding hegemons. The power of

primacy transmuted economic strength into military force and America's growing dominance in both realms was long apparent. Still, a key challenge was 'the sheer variety of military contingencies that a global superpower' like the United States 'has to plan for, all of which, in their way, place differing demands upon the armed forces and the weaponry they are likely to employ' [11]. A self-reinforcing process of ever-growing need for qualitative improvement and quantitative expansion in response to any emerging, perceived, likely, potential, probable or possible challenge to hegemonic primacy would impose cumulative costs which might not, ultimately, be justified by, or recouped from, the benefits.

Paul Kennedy's prognostication of America's decline proved premature and his suggestion that with its intensity of technical innovation, such as in industrial robotics, Japan could supplant its protector [12], inaccurate. A dozen years later, another historian posited that America's decline, seen from a cultural-intellectual, as well as a military-political-economic perspective, had begun after its defeat in Vietnam [13]. This, however, was a minority view on the margins of academic discourses, far removed from policy debates animating the Washington Beltway. Most US practitioners and academic observers apparently believed, if to differing degrees, in the quasi-permanence of the strategic status quo. Shortly after *al-Qaeda's* aerial assaults on New York and Washington, Joseph Nye explained America's hitherto relaxed view of the world without. Post Soviet-fission, no rival could assail America's pre-eminence. The first Gulf War and NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia demonstrated the historical incomparability of US power. Consequently, 'Americans who did pay attention to foreign policy became arrogant about our power, arguing that we did not need to heed other nations. We seemed both invincible and invulnerable' [14].

Nye posited that '9/11' revealed the fallacy of these assumptions, and while America remained the dominant power in the system, the obscure, opaque and varied nature of new threats required it to engage with friendly states, many of these already allied to it. Having played a key role in shaping the Clinton Administration's 1990s East Asia policy framework focusing on the 1996 US–Japan security accord, Nye stressed that although China's economic and military might was growing, it was decades away from any meaningful rivalry with America, and Washington was unlikely to sit quietly until then. He noted that America's allies, especially Japan, could significantly ballast US capabilities in Asia. With the US–Japanese alliance re-invigorated, America could encourage China to move in ways compatible with US interests [15]. Alliances and strategic partnerships with friendly powers would solidify America's dominance.

The George W. Bush Administration's determination to pursue its goals unilaterally, if necessary, turned its 'coalition of the willing' into a select band of acolytes which launched *Operation Iraqi Freedom* in early 2003. Shortly afterwards, Nye described the swift occupation of Iraq and Saddam Hussein's ouster as a 'dazzling display of America's hard military power', which was nonetheless costly in 'soft power' terms [16]. Even before the Battles of Fallujah and other challenging points of resistance and revelations about military misconduct and large-scale non-combatant Iraqi deaths tarnished the glory of tactical victory, Nye cautioned, 'The

United States may be more powerful than any other polity since the Roman Empire, but like Rome, America is neither invincible nor invulnerable' [17].

America's defence-intelligence community had, by 2005, ascertained that among possible challenges to US primacy, none looked more concerning than those potentially posed by the rapidly evolving PLA. Beijing's military modernisation, the last of Dengist reforms' four elements, had been spurred by US-led *Operation Desert Storm*, Clinton's 1996 deployments of carrier strike groups near Taiwan, and *Operation Allied Force* against Serbia in 1999 [18]. Recognition of the RMA's impact on American prowess, and the PLA's backwardness, triggered reviews by Chinese strategists of possible 'leap-frogging' into 'mechanisation' and 'informatisation'. These would telescope development, induction and integration of lethally networked mobile weapon-systems, train the manpower needed to deploy these in combat, and restructure the PLA organisationally to assimilate this 'new' force into existing formations. The process progressed so well that DoD told Congress, 'Over the long term, if current trends persist, PLA capabilities could pose a credible threat to other modern militaries operating in the region' [19]. Foremost among these were US forces asserting hegemonic dominance as the key instrument of America's unrivalled stature.

In 2007, DoD-funded analyses delineated threats from the PLA's 'antiaccess' strategy 'intended to interfere with the US military's ability to deploy to or operate within overseas theatres of operation' [20]. The PLA was developing capabilities to mount precision attacks on key nodes of America's forward- and proximally-deployed forces, installations, services and systems. Chinese conventional ballistic missiles with submunition-warheads and improved guidance systems attaining circular-error-probability of less than 50 m could strike US and allied airfields and aircraft in Okinawa, elsewhere in Japan, and South Korea, eroding air-cover for US operations [21]. This would lay other US assets open to Chinese air- or missile attacks. PLA cruise missiles, aircraft carrying precision-guided munitions (PGMs), or special operations forces (SOF) could destroy US command facilities and satellite ground stations, severing terrestrial communications. High-energy lasers and kinetic-energy anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons, both recently tested, could disrupt US surveillance and reconnaissance satellites. PLA jammers could render US early-warning (EW) radars ineffective while long-range surface-to-air or air-to-air missiles attacked EW aircraft. China could thus degrade US C4ISR assets while its electro-magnetic pulse (EMP) attacks wrought additional havoc [22].

Attacks on in-theatre American logistics, transportation and support units would threaten deployment and sustained operations. Okinawa, a major US military hub, would be especially vulnerable [23]. American analysts stressed the operational and symbolic impact of Chinese attacks on US aircraft carriers moored at Japanese or South Korean naval bases. Underway carriers would be more difficult to detect and target, but with its growing ISR facilities and multiple missiles, aircraft, ships and submarines gaining precision-attack capabilities, the PLA could successfully strike these, too [24]. These conclusions were drawn long before Chen Bingde, Vice-Chairman of China's Central Military Commission (CMC), confirmed the development of the DF-21D 'carrier killer' ballistic missiles [25]. The PLA's induction of

capabilities neutralising US military immunity in the Western Pacific challenged American primacy.

By 2012, the US strategic analytical community shifted to the consensus that US hegemonic power, foundation of the *pax Americana*-based international order which had brought stability and prosperity for decades, had inadvertently engendered a peer-rival, China. The latter's economic ascent and military modernisation challenged US primacy and attendant benefits. This threat must be countered by revitalising America's material strength, especially its military power, in the Asia-Pacific region, even if this policy triggered Chinese responses by deepening Beijing's fears of encirclement [26]. Until that point, however, views had differed. Some strategists noted the inadequacies of grand-strategies founded on the application of lethal force.

Comparing the relative merits of hegemonic hubris and persuasive attraction in pursuing strategic goals, Nye noted, 'Attraction can turn to repulsion if we act in an arrogant manner and destroy the real message of our deeper values' [27]. US military dominance had not, he pointed out, resolved strategic quandaries or prevented either defeat in Vietnam or the 2001 *al-Qaida* attacks [28]. Nye posited, military primacy only counted for so much in the currency of power. He visualised international politics as a three-dimensional chess board: the top board reflected military issues in which America reigned supreme as the sole superpower with hegemonic global military pre-eminence; the middle board of interstate economic relations distributed power among a multipolar constellation in which America needed the help of the European Union (EU), Japan, China and others to manage global economic affairs; the bottom board of transnational issues such as terrorism, international crime, climate change and infectious diseases diffused power among myriad non-state and sub-state actors whose ability to ignore political boundaries enhanced by globalisation and the 'Information Revolution' eroded state-capacity to take meaningful individual action [29].

In this globalised, interconnected and information-based world, Nye felt power-diffusion among myriad non-state and sub-state agents might pose a greater threat than power-transition to other states [30]. Primacy meant little against that complex backdrop: 'Many political leaders still focus almost entirely on military assets and classic military solutions. . . They mistake the necessary for the sufficient. They are one-dimensional players in a three dimensional game.' Nye warned, 'In the long term, that is the way to lose' [31]. These views were not popular with the Bush Administration. However, by 2004, some American analysts had noted that 'The transfer of power from West to East is gathering pace and soon will dramatically change the context for dealing with international challenges -- as well as the challenges themselves. Many in the West are already aware of Asia's growing strength.' However, recognition triggered few policy changes. Consequently, Western countries would likely 'repeat their past mistakes' [32]. Three years later, Robert Gates, succeeding Donald Rumsfeld as the Secretary of Defence at a time of deepening despondency, offered a changed perspective:

Looking around the world today, optimism and idealism would not seem to have much of a place at the table. There is no shortage of anxiety about where our nation is headed and what its role will be in the 21st century [33].

Although Gates presided over the world's largest military forces, costing over half-a-trillion dollars annually, he acknowledged that armed might was not the most effective tool in securing most of America's global objectives. He noted the role diplomacy and aid could play in supplementing lethal coercion, by itself an inadequate instrument. Urging a significant growth of the Department of State's \$36bn budget, Gates made 'the case for strengthening our capacity to use "soft" power and for better integrating it with "hard" power' [34]. He managed a 'soft landing' by reducing the rate of growth in America's defence spending as the Obama Administration confronted the whirlwind of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. However, he was implementing President Obama's wishes rather than his own, and his successor, Leon Panetta, encountered even tougher budgetary challenges than Gates did.

Investments in hard power, Nye showed, served only some purposes in the pursuit of global interests. The cost-benefit calculations of great powers and secondary actors, proportional to the capacity to pursue their interests, differed significantly. Calculations varied even more depending on whether the system was unipolar, bipolar, multipolar or in a state of transition between two orders, with systemic equilibrium eroded. Power in a unipolar system is so overwhelmingly concentrated in hegemonic hands that the distinction between secondary powers' threat perceptions and the threat inherent in the power of primacy is often blurred. Distance, the differences between offensive and defensive stances, and intentions no longer moderate the threat's existential nature from the percipient's perspective [35]. Dramatic power differentials separating the hegemon and other players mean the latter 'must worry primarily about the hegemon's capabilities rather than its intentions' [36]. Even if hegemonic America was benign, the potency of its lethal capabilities rendered its benevolent reassurances questionable. In a unipolar system, 'the burden of proof is on the hegemon to demonstrate to others that its power is not threatening' [37]. For a perennially fire-fighting system-manager, using hard-power as the key tool of primacy to maintain order in an inherently disorderly milieu driven by the 'selfish in a self-help world' [38], this was a constant, possibly lost, struggle.

Another academic-practitioner, Zbigniew Brzezinski, too, examined structural pitfalls confronting the primate. America's unsurpassed military, economic and scientific-technological dominance ensured that it 'does not have, and will not soon face, a global peer. There is thus no realistic alternative to the prevailing American hegemony and the role of US power as the indispensable component of global security.' Still, as a peer-less power, America nonetheless was 'increasingly pre-occupied with threats from a variety of much weaker hostile sources' [39]. America's security paradox, like its many attributes, was unique: the world's first truly global superpower faced 'real' risks to its security. 'Exclusive dependence on multilateral cooperation could become a prescription for strategic

lethargy' in an increasingly threatening environment; yet reliance on 'the unilateral exercise of sovereign power, especially if accompanied by a self-serving definition of the emerging threats,' could isolate a paranoid America from a world infected with a 'spreading anti-American virus.' Unmatched strength notwithstanding, America's homeland remained, possibly chronically, 'uniquely insecure' [40]. Brzezinski asked [41]:

- What are the main threats to America?
- As the hegemon, is America entitled to more security than other states?
- How should America cope with potentially lethal threats emanating not from powerful rivals but from weak foes?
- What should America's role be in the Far East, given Japan's continued dependence and its 'quietly growing military might – and also given the rise of Chinese power?'
- Is American democracy compatible with a hegemonic role, however carefully camouflaged?

Brzezinski noted that history recorded change, offering 'a reminder that nothing endures indefinitely.' History suggested 'the current American global preponderance' was no exception. 'It, too, will fade at some point, probably later than some wish and earlier than many Americans take for granted' [42]. This view did not excite post-Cold War elites who had decided to [43]:

- manage, steer, and shape 'central power relationships in a world of shifting geopolitical balances' and intensifying national aspirations so that a more cooperative global system crystallised;
- contain or terminate conflicts, prevent terrorism and the proliferation of WMD, and 'advance collective peacemaking' in strife-torn regions so that violence receded rather than spread; and
- address 'the increasingly intolerable inequalities in the human condition', consonant with an emerging 'global conscience', and promote collective responses to climate-related and other ecological threats to planetary well-being.

These tasks, voluntarily adopted and refined by successive administrations, offered a template for assessing *pax Americana*'s success or failure. However, the steady evolution of post-Cold War trends and power-relations was shaken up by *al-Qaeda*'s 2001 attacks which transformed the Bush Administration into a 'messianic, crusading global leader.' President Bush, 'supported by the Vice-President and a group of highly motivated officials' who 'gained the President's ear', helped 'redefine him as the commander-in-chief of a nation at war' [44]. That episode transformed America's activist role in managing world affairs, often generating responses. US primacy, visibly engaged in pursuing immediate national-security goals, contributed significantly to a loss of international respect and admiration, while eroding America's national substance.

Brzezinski noted, 'Even the world's paramount superpower can go badly astray and endanger its own primacy if its strategy is misguided and its understanding of the world is faulty' [45]. The corrosive second- and third-order effects of the Bush Administration's security policies transmogrified the sole superpower's global persona. By mid-2008, as the US financial markets came under growing pressure from the consequences of virtual autonomy within a deregulated milieu, the dawning of a post-American 'Age of Nonpolarity' beckoned [46]. The global downturn triggered by crises afflicting the US mortgage, banking and insurance sectors in 2008–2009 accelerated the process of relative power shift away from America [47].

A Matter of Mutual Mistrust

Few American strategists and policymakers acknowledged even the possible validity of the 'hegemonic decline' theory for their country. However, several thoughtful observers noticed the remarkable growth of China's economic and military capabilities over the past two decades and how, in comparison with America's lack-lustre economic performance since 2008–2009, a 'relative' decline or erosion of US primacy transformed the strategic equilibrium. According to one study, 'the fact that China's global impact and ranking has been increasing rapidly in recent years and that the U.S. is experiencing serious difficulties domestically is itself producing particular sensitivities and uncertainty' [48]. Uncertainty produced elite-level strategic distrust of China comprising four constituent elements [49]:

- US leaders believed China thought it was 'Number Two and assumes that the US, as Number One, will perforce try to hold back China's rise.' US leaders worried that China viewed bilateral relations in 'fundamentally zero-sum terms' and sought to displace the hegemon. These Americans thought it would be prudent to interpret and respond to Chinese actions 'in this light.'
- Chinese military acquisitions, writings and behaviour in proximate seas challenged US military immunity in what Washington considered 'a vital region', eroded US ability to support client-states, and pursue primacy-related goals. The PLA's 'area-denial/anti-access' capabilities must be countered with appropriate strategic and procurement responses.
- US leaders, shocked by the impact of the global downturn, were sensitive 'to other countries' potentially trying to take advantage' of America's difficulties. China's alleged cyber-thefts of US intellectual property, mercantilist practices weakening US manufacturing, and currency policies constraining US exports generated profound anger.
- China's growing capabilities influenced regional actors to modify their behaviour and adjust their policies while Chinese words and actions eroded their confidence in US ability to maintain its position in the future, causing 'serious concern'.

US intelligence acquisitions of privileged internal Chinese leadership communications suggested an underlying assumption within the CPC elite of a zero-sum Sino-US dynamic, a perspective thought to reveal China's 'real' objectives [50]. Chinese leaders, too, discerned in US word and action a determination indefinitely to extend America's hegemonic primacy, partly and, increasingly, by constraining China's growth and influence. Dozens of bilateral fora for negotiating a spectrum of Sino-US differences notwithstanding, mutual distrust founded on and expressed in three related strands, persisted:

- Fundamentally different political traditions, value systems and cultures divided the polities. Washington negatively viewed China's authoritarian regime, its human rights violations and political opacity; Beijing saw US stances and action as consistently hostile and aimed at undermining its authority and legitimacy. In that context, rival national security- and intelligence organs worked on the premise that Sino-US relations were unfriendly, and their work deepened distrust.
- Washington and Beijing also suffered from an inadequate understanding of each other's policy-making processes and systems, and the relations between respective governments and other entities. What may be uncoordinated action initiated by disparate groups in one country was often seen by the other as well-planned and deliberate stratagems designed to pursue zero-sum gains. Beijing particularly identified actions of American NGOs and activists with Washington, especially the CIA.
- The perceived narrowing US-China power gap, seen with concern in America and optimistic anticipation in China- deepened strategic distrust. Americans suspected China had ambitious plans to 'beat' the hegemon while Chinese feared that America would do everything it could to prevent China's 'national revitalization' and restoration of its historical global status [51].

Beijing had harboured deep suspicions of US motives and actions since the PRC's establishment. America's support for an independent ROC on Taiwan, protracted efforts to undermine the CPC's legitimacy, direct conflict during the Korean War, covert assistance for Tibetan rebels in the 1950s and 1960s, and clandestine assistance to India in opposition to China during this period combined to create a zero-sum milieu of mutual mistrust [52]. While Sino-US covert collaboration against the Soviet Union in 1971–1989 moderated this narrative, residual Chinese anxiety ranged from 'fears of American interference in China's internal politics to suspicions of American attempts to prevent China from becoming a great global power' [53]. Perceived threats emanating from American policies to China's territorial integrity, its economic well-being, and its global stature widely affected the Chinese cognoscenti [54].

Developments since the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis and 2008–2009 Great Recession, from both of which China recovered in better shape and more quickly than most other powers, reshaped Chinese views of the international system, the system-manager, and China's prospective role. Key inferences:

- America's political and economic systems betrayed 'deep deficiencies'.
- China's emergence as the second-largest economy coincided with its status as the second political power.
- China's space-programme and military modernisation added to confidence gained from the successes of the 2008 Olympics and 2010 Shanghai Exposition.
- China did not credit the US-led order for these successes.
- Many Chinese believed that despite resilience, America faced long-term decline, but aware of deep mutual interdependence, lacked collective confidence that China could supplant America.
- Shifting Sino-US power balances were a component of a wider power-shift comprising Brazil, India, Russia and South Africa, as well as China (BRICS), reflected in the G20 supplanting the G8.
- America's failings juxtaposed to Chinese 'successes' suggested the Washington consensus was giving way to a Chinese political-economic model, a 'Beijing consensus' [55].

Chinese elites, aware that their US counterparts held different views, believed Washington's aim to perpetuate American hegemony could only generate US efforts to constrain China's growth, depriving it of the status China would otherwise acquire. They also believed American elites operated with a Hobbesian mindset and US emphases on democracy and human rights were simply tools used to pursue power-political goals. In this context, given China's historical, political-economic and cultural specificities and its sheer size, America must view China as the only 'major challenge' to its hegemonic status. They saw US statements and action with regard to Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Chinese dissidents as efforts to 'Westernize' and 'divide' their country. Despite President Obama's assurances that Washington had no wish to contain China, America's increasing military activities in China's periphery and growing ties to neighbourhood rivals were seen as evidence of America's strategic military pressure on China [56].

These factors precipitated a central issue in the Sino-US discourse—a 'power struggle' and 'power competition' between an allegedly status quo-oriented prime and a reportedly revisionist rising rival [57]. Despite diplomatic efforts aimed at attenuating the confrontational strands of mutual perceptions and behaviour over the past two decades, this trend intensified in the early twenty first century [58]. One Chinese scholar, unable even to understand what the rivals meant by trust, posited that efforts to gain mutual trust between 'fierce competitors like China and America' were both misguided and destined to fail. He advised that, instead, they should 'strive for...cooperation on shared interests and an open dialogue on conflicting interests' [59].

At the root of this dynamic had been China's 'astonishing' economic transformation resulting from annual 'growth-rates of about 8-12% over the last 30 years.' By 2012, China's GDP had exceeded half of the US figure and could 'overtake the United States within the next two decades' [60]. This economic progress paralleled China's success 'in building an impressive technological capacity as well as a strong domestic innovation system.' Together, these successes allowed Beijing to

fund ‘an impressive military build-up, permitting the PLA to gain operational abilities to likely prevail in a military encounter with US forces close to Chinese borders.’ With the US military serving as the spearhead of America’s systemic primacy buttressed with hub-and-spokes alliances spanning much of the globe, this development raised the possibility of ending the ‘Vasco da Gama-period of Western dominance in the Western Pacific’ [61].

This relatively sudden and virtually imminent end of five century-old Euro-Atlantic domination of the Asia-Pacific region unsettled many of those who had exercised power here, and those who have been subjected to it. How the resultant fluidity in Sino-US power relations would evolve in coming decades, what its regional and wider impact would be for America and its clients, how China might use its growing power and what other countries needed to do to ensure any systemic transition was managed so that their core interests were protected—in short, how *dominant-system* fluidity could be addressed so as to restore a modicum of definition and clarity and establish structural equilibrium by non-destabilising means—became a central focus for policy makers across the Pacific. Deepening anxiety triggered much diplomatic and some military activity, but did not resolve the elemental challenges of managing systemic transitional uncertainty.

Chinese calculations of power-accretion and power-shifts reflected tensions between status quo-oriented actors, and those whose growing relative power challenged the former’s status. In late twentieth century, Chinese analysts broadly agreed that in power rankings, America remained the unassailable player while China lurked around the sixth position behind Japan, Russia and others [62]. However, early in the twenty first century, although differences remained among analysts calculating China’s relative power status, China’s CNP measures within the perceived hierarchy rose significantly. In 2003, economic activity measured in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), defining CNP calculations, placed China’s \$6.4 trillion-GDP second behind America’s \$10.9 trillion-GDP, well ahead of Japan’s \$3.6 trillion [63]. However, the World Bank’s purchasing-power parity (PPP) calculations were too obscure to draw attention to the ongoing transformation of the global economic and political-economic order.

According to one Chinese scholar, some analysts under-estimated China’s GDP and CNP so as to avoid raising concerns or acknowledging growing international responsibilities, but others over-estimated these with a view to airing China’s revisionist potential, a ‘China threat’ theory [64]. Aware of the sensitivities generated by China’s rapid economic growth, CPC leaders coined the phrase ‘peaceful rise’ in 2003 to reassure outsiders of China’s pacific progression. But ‘rise’ suggested a measure of systemic competition, with possibly unsettling consequences and, in April 2004, Beijing adopted ‘peaceful development’ as the essence of China’s ‘national rejuvenation’. This became the core of China’s grand strategy [65]. Still, a lack of consensus on China’s relative power, and what Beijing might do with it in the future, dogged security analyses at home and abroad.

Methodological differences in CNP calculations, too, ensured varied outcomes. The PLA’s AMS used a seven-category system comprising 29 secondary indices and over 100 tertiary indices; CASS applied eight categories and 64 indices; CICIR

used a seven-category, 115-indices system, and analysts at Beijing's Tsinghua University developed eight categories and 23 indices [66]. One school posited that however CNP was calculated, the power status of states was essentially relative and reflected or shaped the order undergirding international politics. The growth in a state's power indicated an expansion of its autonomy within the international system, causing the relative contraction of the autonomous space of other actors. This was the zero-sum nature, in this view, of systemic power dynamics [67]. In the post-Cold War era of a sole-superpower facing several secondary major-powers, America was 'destined to defend its status against any possible challenging states.' As a major secondary power, 'China automatically becomes an opponent of the United States' [68]. By 2005, Chinese and some non-Chinese commentators were predicting China's ascent to the status of a superpower within the first few decades of the twenty first century [69].

In a competitive milieu in which all secondary powers other than China and Russia were allied to the USA, and Russia was still struggling in its post-Soviet reincarnation, these assessments reflected and reinforced an adversarial dynamic. Against this backdrop, using a simplified calculus, one Chinese scholar posited in 2006 that although in military, political and economic realms, China would trail the USA for sometime, China's CNP ranking could rise to third behind that of America and the EU, and the Sino-US CNP gap would be narrowed, by 2015. Despite significant power disparity between the two, these were the two top actors on the global stage, with China rapidly approaching the 'superpower class' [70].

Beijing's responses to America's conduct suggested CPC leaders were more cautious in assessing Sino-US strategic dynamics. They expressed outrage when Washington sold sophisticated weapons to Taipei, allegedly bolstering Taiwan's pro-independence tendencies or moderating pressures for acquiescing in Beijing's reunification demands, and when US leaders met the 'chief splittist' Dalai Lama, the self-exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, but China restrained its responses within the framework of managed diplomacy. US bombing of the Chinese chancery in Belgrade in 1999, and the EP3-J8 collision near Hainan in 2001 triggered vociferous anger, but Beijing managed the aftermath of both incidents diplomatically. Following *al-Qaeda's* 2001 attacks on America, Beijing collaborated with its Cold War-era partner against militant groups in Afghanistan. When North Korea's nuclear programme escalated tensions in 2002, China mounted 'massive coordination efforts' leading to tripartite talks in Beijing followed by six-party meetings.

In 2002, shortly after its accession to the WTO, China enacted statutes regulating munitions trading, transforming its arms-control system from a bureaucratic one to a legally-based one. These acts significantly boosted Sino-US relations [71]. However, the parallel erosion of America's need for Chinese assistance, and the rapid growth of China's power capabilities within the US-led unipolar system, posed structural challenges to sustained Sino-US amity. Each power employed strategic coercion, usually but not always subtly, to push the other into acknowledging its core interests and acting within the bounds of its rival's comfort zone. Although mutual deterrence prevented escalation beyond an unstated threshold, the PLA's conventional backwardness disadvantaged it. China could be confident of the

efficacy of strategic coercion only when its survival was at stake [72]. Even in economic intercourse, given China's greater need for access to the US market than America's dependence on China trade, Beijing enjoyed only limited leverage [73]. Proclaiming and ensuring the acceptance of China's core interests, therefore, acquired additional import but also added complexity vis-a-vis America.

The Prism of History

Chinese analysts used Western frameworks, e.g., Hobbesian anarchy, unmitigated confrontation and conflict, Lockean competition and management of conflicting interests, and Kantian liberalist cooperation, to examine China's security challenges and possible responses. But many of them also looked back to ancient history to seek solutions to the challenges facing modern China [74]. Most focused on the 'Warring States Period' (475-221BCE), when seven major kingdoms, emerging from the ashes of the Zhou imperial order, engaged in almost continuous struggle for survival, expansion, power and prestige. Warfare eventually led to consolidation of a Qin-led unifying polity. President Xi Jinping's emphasis on China's historical experience as a fountainhead of wisdom for managing China's evolution as a power, and its shifting relations with the world beyond, underscored the import of historicity [75].

Chinese analysts particularly recalled the advice given to rulers by Sun Zi two millennia ago. Although in his time, princes of the 'Middle Kingdom' little appreciated the non-Sinic world, and their own familiar realms represented 'all under heaven', Sun Zi's pronouncements on the relationship among the king, the state, society and the world were seen to offer guidance for managing international affairs:

The state is the most powerful instrument for benefit in the world. The ruler of men is the most influential position of authority for benefit in the world. If a ruler employs the 'Way' to maintain these two – the state and his position – then there will be the greatest peace and security, the greater honour and prosperity, and the wellspring for accumulating what is beautiful and fine. If a ruler does not employ the 'Way' to maintain them, then there will be the greatest danger and peril and the greatest humiliation and adversity. It would be better not to have these two than to have them [76].

Equally important were the ability and intelligence of the king and his ministers. If the king was able and appointed an able prime minister, he would become a 'true king'. If an incapable king recognised his weaknesses and appointed men of ability, he would gain power. If he was incapable but did not realise this and appointed sycophants or relatives, then he would 'be endangered and encroached upon, and, in the extreme case, annihilated' [77]. Whereas most societies had able persons ready to serve the king as his prime minister, the ability to find, select and appoint them depended on the king. Those who followed the 'Way', survived and rose to greatness; those who did not were destroyed [78]. Sun Zi also noted that only a sage could be a 'true king' and rule an empire [79]. This relationship between the ruler and his domain also applied to wider—for instance, global—exercise of power

[80]. Sun Zi classified rulers on the bases of two attributes—mores and ethics, and power and strength. A ‘True King’ displayed strong mores and ethics and although usually had strong power, it was possible for a True King to have some weaknesses in power. Subjects voluntarily submitted to a true king. A hegemon displayed fairness and honesty in mores and ethics, and exercised strong power. Subjects accepted a hegemon’s authority primarily because of the coercive costs of challenging it. A mighty ruler who based his reign only on his strength had no moral or ethical attributes [81].

Measured against this yardstick, world leadership depended on a combination of moral and ethical principles, hard military power and engagement with the world outside. At the end of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson’s ‘Fourteen-Point’ proposal on the establishment of the League of Nations underscored justice and morality, but despite that and America’s strong military power, its isolationism ‘prevented the United States from achieving world leadership’ [82]. China’s aspirations manifest in its ‘rise’ ought to be assessed in this context. Its status as a superpower would not be questioned, but the nature of its power could be. If China wanted to differentiate itself from the ‘contemporary leadership role enacted by the United States’, it needed to present a better social-moral-ethical role model, one closer to Sun Zi’s ‘true king’ paradigm than to the hegemonic one. If China became ‘a super-state grounded in high morals and ethics, it should bring about a world order more peaceful and secure than that today’ [83].

Another ancient school, the *Mohist* doctrine, crystallising the teachings of Mo Di, also known as Mozi, a minister in the state of Song who lived sometime between 490BCE and 390BCE [84], included discussions of philosophy, economics and mathematics. Its main text, also called the *Mozi*, classified the application of force by states in monist terms. Mo Di’s followers, the Mohists, became a well-organised order with influential networks across much of China. However, after the fall of the Qin dynasty in 206BCE, Mohists lost their influence and organisational cohesion, and whole chapters of the *Mozi* texts were either lost or corrupted. Only in modern times has most of the *Mozi* been rediscovered, collected, translated and analysed. The *Mozi* distinguished between two kinds of warfare, *Zhu*- combat against unjust aggressors, and *Gong*-war of expansion and aggression. Mo Di and Mohists opposed *Gong* and supported those waging *Zhu* [85]. Mohists also propagated an additional concept—*jian’ai*, or universal love, bereft of which robbers robbed others, and kings invaded other kingdoms. Mo Di said, ‘...regard the state of others as one’s own, the houses of others as one’s own, the persons of others as one’s self. When feudal lords love one another there will be no more war’ [86].

Critics such as Mencius found this notion as threatening to the organisation of kingdoms under kings, and families under fathers. Whatever the merit of the critique, Mohists appeared to have lost out to other schools of political philosophy. Modern studies of the *Mozi* stressed the similarities of Mohist values of opposition to aggression, support for the defenders, and mutual assistance among interdependent entities to liberal ideas of international relations [87]. This combination has

been gaining prominence in Chinese analyses of China's international security milieu and Beijing's responses to myriad challenges confronting a 'rising' China.

Military minds like Sun Zi's and Mo Di's were not the only sources of strategic erudition shaping the evolution of Chinese political thought. In 81BCE, for instance, Emperor Zhao of Han summoned more than 60 scholars from around the land for a 2-day policy-review with cabinet ministers. Key economic decisions on wartime taxation and monopolies as well as military and diplomatic policies were debated. The record of these exchanges, *Discourses on Salt and Iron*, became a key contribution to Chinese statecraft. While a senior minister urged the use of superior force against weaker neighbouring powers to achieve inexpensive but beneficial expansion, scholars argued that military expansion was often short-sighted, cost a lot but brought little profit, increased domestic burdens and could cause state-collapse. They advised that 'Broad virtue will bring distant people to come and follow' [88]. By contrasting a powerful force capable of expanding territory with 'broad virtue' which brought 'distant countries to submit', the cognoscenti offered an alternative paradigm of 'expansion by submission' [89]. Han ministers and their scholarly interlocutors reached no consensus and subsequent Chinese policy often combined both strands [90]. More recent Chinese conduct displayed such duality and, future Chinese strategy and diplomacy, too, could follow that ambivalent course.

China's 'domestic' political history, a record of interactions among constituent polities comprising the Han-Chinese 'Middle Kingdom', formed the core of the historical evolution of Chinese political thought, but other elements, too, contributed. China's relations with proximate polities, the narrative of its Asian 'foreign relations', filled the traditional diplomatic space in Chinese statecraft, offering templates for China's current and future diplomacy. Early and mid-twentieth century Western academic research, spearheaded by John Fairbank, established the import of the 'tributary system' in ancient Chinese approaches to non-Han polities [91].

Some Chinese scholars saw the tribute system as the fountainhead of a distinctly Chinese school of international relations [92]. The system was fashioned around a power hierarchy topped by the Chinese Emperor, the 'son of heaven', with non-Chinese polities considered both weaker and inferior. Trade and tribute were parallel instruments of hierarchical intercourse between a superordinate China and subordinate non-Han actors. Chinese rulers initiated the tribute system as they valued the prestige foreign tribute bestowed on their authority; foreign rulers participated in the system because they valued trade with China. Chinese rulers ascribed higher moral value to foreign tributes while 'barbarians' valued the material gains from China trade [93]. Cultural processes manifest in Sinocentric ritual observances were considered instruments of attracting 'barbarians' by the Emperor's 'rule by virtue' rather than coercive subordination.

Many Chinese scholars viewed the tributary system as China's bureaucratic management of relations with non-Sinic polities, using complex sets of principles, rules and procedures. The elaborate rituals foreign emissaries were expected to observe while visiting the Chinese capital, the detailed listing of tributes foreign

envoys presented to the Emperor, and similar details of the Emperor's reciprocal gifts, the frequency of tributes, and the routes travelled by foreign envoys, were all part of this bureaucratic management of foreign relations [94].

This Sino-centric perspective envisaged the tribute system as a Chinese diplomatic management system with no input from the non-Sinic end of the exchange. It was, therefore, a limited instrument for assessing both China's relationships with neighbouring polities and the East Asian order within which those relationships were formed, conducted and evolved. While useful for understanding the development of China's diplomatic praxis vis-à-vis proximate polities, it offered little help to appreciating the political order or the comprehensive distribution of power across China's neighbourhood [95]. Other Chinese scholars described the tribute system as the core institution formalising both assumptions and practices undergirding interstate relations across historical East Asia. In this view, the tribute system both symbolised and manifested the embodiment of an order fashioned around *Pax Sinica* [96].

Critics note that the Chinese Empire fluctuated enormously in territorial and economic size, organisational cohesion, and capacity to shape its environment over the millennia of recorded history. Considering the tributary system as a functional tool of immutable utility through this long and variegated period would be inaccurate. Besides, whether China's rulers formulated foreign policy solely, or primarily, on the basis of an assumed superiority of Sinic attributes throughout the two millennia of dynastic rule remained uncertain. In this view, a distinction must be made between a strong China and a weak China, a unified empire and a fragmented, fractious agglomeration. Actual, fungible, power and the nature of the external environment were likely to have shaped Chinese diplomacy as much as did a sense of Chinese superiority. Power realities modified and moderated Sinocentricity and a belief in the 'barbarian' inferiority" [97]. How non-Chinese rulers viewed China and why some but not all of them voluntarily submitted to a tributary relationship are not explained by either Western or Chinese scholarship. In fact, the system did not even consider the reality of diminishing power over increasing distances from the Chinese capital in ancient times.

Not all Chinese rulers exercised equally uniform control over areas beyond their immediate suzerainty. They reigned over a spectrum of diminishing influence stretching through an inner vassal area, an outer vassal area and a 'temporary non-vassal area'. Chinese rulers did not expect to exercise authority over the last, and often treated them as equals. The Sui and Tang dynasties, for instance, maintained 'fraternal' relations with Tibetan, Turkic and Uighur polities before the Han finally subdued and subjugated these [98]. So, the tribute system might be useful in describing and explaining China's regional foreign relations in periods of imperial cohesion and power, but it did not offer an immutable framework for appreciating Chinese diplomacy at other times. While examinations of historical experience enriched China's intellectual capital, deepened understanding of the complexity of the polity's past, and perhaps helped China gain international respect for the rich heritage bestowed by its antiquity, such exercises made limited contributions to China's ability to manage and respond to more contemporary

issues and challenges. And the latter did prove increasingly complex, although China's 'national rejuvenation' catapulted it from the ranks of secondary actors to close to the peak of the systemic hierarchy at the end of the first decade of the twenty first century.

An Insecurity-Dialectic Crystallises

Although China's anxiety vis-à-vis America was rooted in its inability to 'reunite' Taiwan in the face of US military deterrence, other factors acquired salience as drivers. Concerns over North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, seen in periodic spurts in tension triggered by 'incidents' led the US and Japan to begin consultations on ballistic missile defence (BMD) in December 1993. Collaboration was formalised in the 1996 renewal of the 1960 defence treaty. In August 1999, the allies signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Japan-US Cooperative Research Project. A 2002 meeting between Defence Ministers and a summit between President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi in 2003 accelerated the pace of BMD co-operation. In December 2003, Tokyo decided to deploy an operational BMD system to defend Japanese territorial expanse. A year later, America and Japan signed a BMD Framework MoU, deepening and broadening cooperation. In June 2006, the allies launched the 'joint cooperative development' of the Standard Missile (SM)-3 Block IIA. In March 2007, Japan deployed US-supplied PAC-3 Patriot ABM systems for local BMD operations at Iruma Air Base, with additional deployments which followed.

Between 2008 and 2010, Japanese forces tested both PAC-3 and SM-3 BMD systems, the latter being installed on two *Atago*-class cruisers, and four *Kongou*-class destroyers, the *JS Kongou*, *JS Chokai*, *JS Myoko*, and the *JS Kirishima*, and tested in collaboration with the US Missile Defence Agency (MDA) and US PACOM [99]. By early 2011, the Japanese archipelago, its airspace and maritime expanse were well protected by the two complementary systems. Close cooperation between the two allies in designing, developing, testing, deploying and operating the systems deepened mutual military interoperability, occasionally blurring national distinctions.

Chinese concern over Japan's development—with direct and substantial US assistance—of BMD capabilities exceeded that over US acquisition of similar assets, because of the consequences of physical proximity: 'As Japan is a neighbour of China, its development of missile defence merits China's attention' [100]. With a modest arsenal of long-range ballistic missiles comprising its second-strike deterrent force, Beijing's anxiety over potentially hostile BMD systems in its vicinity was understandable. Effective BMD deployments in proximate areas could destroy the PLA second Artillery's ballistic missiles in their boost- and post-boost phases, thereby neutering China's deterrent capability, laying it open to strategic blackmail, coercion, or decapitation [101]. Given the competitive nature of post-1945 Sino-Japanese relations, an advanced Japanese BMD system developed and sustained with US assistance posed significant strategic challenges to Beijing.

Chinese analysts also underscored apparent inconsistencies between America's demand that all signatory states comply with the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), and America's own adherence to it. Washington initiated and pursued to conclusion the MTCR, limiting proliferation of missiles and related technologies to systems carrying payloads of less than 500 kg to a distance of less than 300 km. However, America granted itself exceptions: 'The United States intends to implement the MTCR in a manner that does not impede missile defense cooperation with friends and allies' [102].

US-Japanese BMD collaboration included efforts to secure a maximum flight velocity of 4-4.5 km per second, expand the system's defence radius from 100 to 1,000 km, and extend the interception range for targeting incoming missiles [103]. DoD's MDA confirmed in 2012 the details of the US-Japan SM-3 Cooperative Development Programme designed to upgrade the system with the 21-in. diameter SM-3 Block IIA missiles aiming 'to defeat longer range ballistic missiles' [104]. Although Japan's BMD was ostensibly aimed at North Korean missiles, a completed SM-3 Block IIA system would be effective against *all* long-range missiles, including Chinese ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) comprising Beijing's strategic deterrent. Chinese commentary, describing US missile-defence programmes as destabilising, reflected profound angst. In 2001, shortly before Washington abrogated the ABM Treaty, Sha Zukang, head of China's Arms Control and Disarmament Department, said, the US National Missile Defence (NMD) programme would

not only undermine global strategic balance and stability, but also disrupt efforts for security in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, the US also intends to deploy Theatre Missile Defense (TMD) in the region. Research and development of TMD per se may not necessarily constitute a violation of the ABM Treaty. But, the crucial question is how large is the scale and what are the nature and function of TMD that the U.S. is prepared to deploy in Asia. If this TMD can be used as part of NMD and constitute the front deployment of NMD in the region, then its adverse impact on regional security and stability will be no less than the NMD itself [105].

China's Foreign Minister, Tang Jiaxuan, offered a perceptual context in which Beijing saw Washington's drift towards unilateralist interpretations of security as deepening Chinese, and indeed, non-American, insecurity:

Security is mutual and indivisible. No country can exist in isolation, nor can it resolve all the security issues it faces single-handedly. True security is based on global security and on the extensive cooperation of the international community. A military edge cannot guarantee security. Unilateralism will only lead to greater insecurity. . . The United States possesses the biggest nuclear arsenal and the most sophisticated conventional weapons in the world, and it pursues a deterrence policy based on first use of nuclear weapons. A missile defense will severely impede the nuclear disarmament process and render any U.S. initiative on the reduction of offensive nuclear weapons meaningless. . . Is it really to defend against the missile threat from the few so-called "problem states," or for greater military advantage over other big countries? [106]

Chinese concerns appeared to be straightforward: NMD/BMD systems, once installed, would protect the entire United States from ballistic missile attacks such

as a hypothetical Chinese second-strike. This would reduce the efficacy of China's nuclear deterrent to something approximating zero. Additionally, given the small number of the PLA's ICBMs, interceptors 'deployed on a single site may be enough to knock out all Chinese CSS-4' ICBMs [107], laying China open to a decapitating first-strike. Close links between US-Japanese BMD efforts and the MDA's C4ISR coordination in target-data acquisition, processing, and dissemination, and in operations, meant Japanese BMD assets located in China's neighbourhood reinforced America's NMD carapace, eroding the efficacy of China's strategic deterrent [108]. Comments by a Congressional specialist in ballistic missile-related strategy, in the wake of a significant expansion of the US BMD network in Japan and Southeast Asia, revealed by Secretary of Defence Panetta in 2012, confirmed Chinese fears of US plans to neuter Beijing's deterrent, hobbling China's freedom of action and exposing it to potentially existential threats: 'The focus of our rhetoric is North Korea. The reality is that we're also looking longer term at the elephant in the room, which is China' [109].

Chinese analysts also concluded that a key goal of US BMD plans for Eastern Europe ostensibly targeting Iranian ballistic missiles, denials notwithstanding, was to boost missile defences against Russian ICBMs, thereby threatening Russian deterrent capabilities [110]. This inference resonated with Russian concerns, also reinforcing a general impression of American determination to perpetuate its systemic primacy at the cost of core Chinese and Russian interests. As Sino-US relations experienced growing pressure in the first decade of the twenty first century, deepening anxiety over this crucial element of national security precipitated Chinese responses. Beijing stressed the validity of its long-held belief in 'global multipolarization' in official analyses of the strategic environment, but also noted the systemic fluidity caused by efforts of established powers to retain their status in the face of the growing clout of emerging powers:

The rise and decline of international strategic forces is quickening, major powers are stepping up their efforts to cooperate with each other and draw on each other's strengths. They continue to compete with and hold each other in check, and groups of new emerging developing powers are arising. Therefore, a profound readjustment is brewing in the international system. . . Struggles for strategic resources, strategic locations and strategic dominance have intensified. Meanwhile, hegemonism and power politics still exist, regional turmoil keeps spilling over, hot-spot issues are increasing, and local conflicts and wars keep emerging. The impact of the financial crisis triggered by the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis is snowballing. . . Driven by competition in overall national strength and the development of science and technology, international military competition is becoming increasingly intense, and the worldwide revolution in military affairs (RMA) is reaching a new stage of development. Some major powers are realigning their security and military strategies, increasing their defense investment, speeding up the transformation of armed forces, and developing advanced military technology, weapons and equipment [111].

Sino-US insecurity dialectics began changing in the 1990s. In 1993, President Jiang Zemin issued strategic guidelines for 'the New Period', requiring the PLA to defend China's coastal centres of economic gravity and conduct sea-denial operations beyond Taiwan to deter or delay US intervention by waging 'active defense' to win a 'local war under informatized conditions' [112]. With increasing

funding enabling C4ISR improvements and reform of the defence-industrial base delivering improved platforms, Chinese armed forces, especially the PLAN, acquired capabilities beyond those required for securing control over Taiwan. Twelve years later, with large elements of the PLA transformed by the modernisation drive, Jiang's successor Hu Jintao issued a list of 'historical missions of the armed forces for the new stage in the new century.' Although broadbrush and general, the ambition and scope of the 'new missions' were clear [113]:

- Consolidate the ruling status of the Communist Party
- Help ensure China's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and domestic security in order to continue national development
- Safeguard China's expanding national interests
- Help maintain world peace

With steady—often double-digit—growth in defence allocations since the late 1990s, the PLA, especially PLAN, PLAAF and the second Artillery, continued to field progressively greater capacity to pursue China's security interests in both lethal combat and in military operations other than war (MOOTW). This visible growth in combat power, although not tested in actual operations, nonetheless drove much regional and American security analyses. DoD assessments noted in 2006 that 'China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages' [114]. The PLA's ability to operate beyond Taiwan and the alleged opacity of its strategic intentions caused much official concern in Washington: 'The expanding military capabilities of China's armed forces are a major factor in changing East Asian military balances; improvements in China's strategic capabilities have ramifications far beyond the Asia Pacific region' [115].

America repeatedly welcomed 'the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China,' insisting that no other country had 'done more to assist, facilitate, and encourage China's national development.' Washington encouraged Beijing to 'participate as a responsible international stakeholder by taking on a greater share of responsibility for the stability, resilience and growth of the global system' [116]. This welcome to the top-table was, however, conditional on Beijing's acceptance of the US-led order and actions consonant with the framework of norms and practices in place.

Although Beijing had repeatedly stressed its non-revisionist stance, its reticence in openly endorsing the US-led hierarchy led Washington to posit that 'much uncertainty surrounds China's future course, in particular in the area of its expanding military power and how that power might be used' [117]. The PLA's increasingly sophisticated capacity to inflict lethal costs upon future challengers deeply troubled Washington. Newly fielded DF-31 and DF-31A ICBMs boosted China's strategic deterrent; the PLA's 'continued development of advanced cruise missiles, medium-range ballistic missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles designed to strike ships at sea, including aircraft carriers', and the January 2007 successful test of a direct-ascent anti-satellite weapon, made clear Beijing's determination and

ability to deny access to hostile forces and operate in space and cyber-space as well as in the traditional domains of land, air and sea [118].

Although Chinese leaders had articulated military missions going beyond immediate territorial concerns, they had 'left unclear to the international community the purposes and objectives of the PLA's evolving doctrine and capabilities' [119]. - China's publication of 'incomplete defence expenditure figures' and engagement 'in actions that appear inconsistent with its declaratory policies' were equally concerning. China's 'limited transparency' in military and security affairs posed 'risks to stability by creating uncertainty and increasing the potential for misunderstanding and miscalculation' [120]. The hegemon, concerned over eroding primacy, continued to 'work with our allies and friends in the region to monitor these developments and adjust our policies accordingly' [121].

Chinese leaders from Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, very different men in terms of their background, experience and exposure, heroic exploits and charismatic aura, intellectual gifts and administrative ability, nonetheless displayed comparable strategic caution. Although China's absolute and relative power-positions changed dramatically over the past six decades, especially since the 1980s, Beijing's behaviour—actual conduct as opposed to official and semi-official rhetoric—has been generally moderate and reactive in terms of the application of lethal coercion in international relations. Mao exhibited greater belief in the conflictual nature of the political world than his successors; Deng's understanding of the world was equally coloured by trends to conflict and cooperation; Jiang and Hu trended towards collaborative approaches to international relations [122].

Mao and Deng were strongly driven by their ideological beliefs and both were strong leaders with military support behind them. However, Deng was much more pragmatic, able and willing to adapt policies to changed circumstances and revised goals. Whereas Mao believed a future world war was unavoidable if deferrable, Deng believed it would be possible to avoid one and maintain sustained global peace. This enabled Deng to direct resources and energies towards national economic development [123]. Still, even Mao, under pressure from the Soviet Union, was able to accept pragmatic advice on the need for engaging in strategic collaboration with the 'far enemy', America, so as to counterbalance threats from the Soviet 'near enemy' [124]. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, post-revolutionary bureaucratic manager-leaders, less ideologically driven than their predecessors, did not preside over revisionist edifices [125]. Given the leaders' pre-eminence within the CPC party-state, China under them was not a revisionist power striving to overthrow the US-led order.

Their stress on a revitalised China's status-quo orientation notwithstanding, Chinese analysts did examine ways by which a relatively weaker China could fight stronger adversaries and win a competitive struggle. Asymmetric conflicts in which weaker powers overcame stronger opponents, or the stronger belligerent failed to defeat the weaker party, were studied in detail for lessons [126]. A weaker power with fewer material or intangible resources needed to employ asymmetric strategies and tactics. The spread of technology, reducing marginal costs of

replication, innovation and adaptation, enabled weaker powers to pursue this path. An underdog could concentrate forces locally to establish relative advantage in a limited theatre over a certain period over a more potent enemy. A lesser power could, for instance, visit deadly blows on stronger adversaries with WMDs.

The integration of societies and economies around modern communication networks multiplied the effects of such attacks. If the weaker power failed to secure decisive victory in focused operations, it could prolong the engagement and force the stronger adversary to continue bearing bigger burdens in blood and treasure. Weaker powers could, therefore, while devoting much smaller resources to asymmetric stratagems than their stronger adversaries, wear down the latter by imposing much greater costs. One lesson was, 'when weak powers consistently develop new asymmetries, the scope of war hugely expands' [127]. Once again, concepts and experiences from ancient Chinese history offered a practical way forward.

Mao Zedong stressed the need for enabling the inferior to overcome the superior (*yilishengyou*) by avoiding one's own shortcomings and focusing on the superior adversary's vulnerabilities [128], but Tang dynasty (618–907 AD) strategists had refined this approach. They introduced the term *Shashoujian* (assassin's mace) to describe 'magic weapons' or surprising stratagems with which to befuddle and overwhelm an unsuspecting enemy. As the RMA transformed the nature of combat in the 1990s by telescoping the processes of identifying, locating and engaging hostile targets in a networked battlespace, PLA strategists adapted *Shashoujian* to represent contemporary innovations in armaments, tactics and strategy. In 1997, AMS General Wang Baocun analysed information age warfare, identifying ten defining features [129]:

- Limited goals in conflict
- Short-duration combat
- Limited damage
- Larger battlespaces with lower force densities
- Battlefield transparency
- Intense struggle for information superiority
- Unprecedented force-integration
- Increased pressures for command-and-control
- Strategic objectives gained using precision, not volume, of fire, and
- Attacks on the enemy's weaknesses, not strong-points.

Jiang Zemin, Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), endorsed Wang's analysis, and adopted a science-and-technology based approach to developing the PLA's warfighting potential so as to address its deficiencies in this era of high-technology combat. In 1998, he launched the secret 998 State Security Project, aimed at developing *Shashoujian* concepts and weapons [130]. Led by a powerful CPC Leading Group and managed by the PLA's General Staff commanders, Project 998 comprised the 122 and 126 programmes. The first aimed at improving the PLA's combat efficacy, counter-attack capabilities and readiness, and developing a new generation of high-technology ordnance. The second, rooted in Deng

Xiaoping's 863 Programme launched in 1986, would develop six major areas of armaments over 12–15 years [131]:

- Aerospace technology
- Electronic/information technology
- Strategic defence
- Deep-level counter-attacks
- Optical lasers, and
- Special materials

Shashoujian, however, referred to both weapon systems and the strategic or tactical frameworks in which these were employed. One likely instance of the latter was afforded by Beijing's non-diplomatic approach to its 'core interest' in Taiwan's 'reunification'. Given the convergence of historical Sino-American focus on the question of Taiwan's future—whether Taiwan will seek *de jure* independence and be able to count on American interventionist support and deter a Chinese military response, or acquiesce in re-unification under duress, much of the PLA's efforts prior to Hu Jintao's 2004 proclamation of 'New Historic Missions' beyond Taiwan had indeed focused on Taiwan. Given Taiwan's insular geography, a sea-borne invasion across the Taiwan Strait had been part of the conventional wisdom on the PLA's contingency planning.

In the face of robust Taiwanese defensive preparations and the presence of formidable forward-positioned US forces ready to mount massive intervention in Taipei's behalf, the PLA may have abandoned any invasion plans it may have harboured, changing its coercive tactics to threatening to bombard Taiwan with its large arsenal of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, and/or imposing and enforcing a blockade with its fleet of submarines. Taken alongside informational, political and economic measures, such an approach could prove insuperable [132].

China could, thus, take heart from the inference that as a power with a defensive strategy, in the face of threats from a stronger adversary, it had gained room for manoeuvre. The resultant boost to confidence among nationalist Chinese segments was reinforced by two parallel trends in global opinion as measured in the mid-2000s. Opinion polls recorded around the world demonstrated a substantial decline of US popularity. Virtually in parallel, a general endorsement of China and its policies became noticeable. Official and semi-official Chinese commentary aimed at both domestic and overseas audiences stressed traditional emphases, such as in Sun Zi's writings, on non-lethal diplomatic efforts to undermine the hostility of adversarial powers. CPC leaders took up President Hu Jintao's refrains of 'peaceful rise', later revised to 'peaceful development', and a 'harmonious society' at home and internationally as the *leit motif* of China's national revitalisation, while Premier Wen Jiabao described China as a 'friendly elephant' [133].

Resources being poured into humanitarian relief of the victims of disasters abroad, assistance to developing countries, and UN-led peacekeeping operations in turbulent regions contributed to China's 'soft power approach' to diplomacy.

However, the rise in China's 'soft power' attractions could not be correlated to the decline of America's pull [134]. China could not, therefore, count on its endogenous growth generating growing clout to countermand America's still formidable influence and authority.

Fundamental disjunctures between America's globalist self-image as a unique nation embodying man's highest aspirations, leading humanity towards its better self and the actualisation of its greatest potential, and China's more introspective, non-interventionist if extractive approach to the non-Sinic world was not much discussed. However, that was the philosophical context in which the two powers—one with the most continuous and largely homogeneous, certainly at the elite-level, civilisational polity rooted in millennia-long traditions of self-cognition, the other relatively young and more heterogeneous but driven by messianic aspirations to planetary leadership dedicated to improving the human condition—rubbed up against each other.

Scholars of American history pointed to the core beliefs underpinning the Declaration of Independence as the driver of US foreign policy. In short, the belief that all men are created equal and, therefore, have equal rights which can be neither given up nor taken away, and that people form governments to protect their fundamental rights to life, liberty and property (restated by Jefferson as 'the pursuit of happiness') [135], stated formally in the Union's founding document, both reflected and reinforced an elite mind-set which conflated the national into the universal, creating the impetus for a perpetual quest for revolutionary, if informal, expansion. As one scholar noted, 'When bipolarity gave way to unipolarity there was little for the United States to learn: a preference for superiority comes naturally to Americans as a kind of divine entitlement that empowers the nation to act on behalf of and for the good of others' [136]. China's growing capacity to assert its interests was erecting obstacles.

However, America's ability to shape, far less determine, global events was eroding for reasons other than Sino-US strategic competition although the latter resonated with, and possibly reinforced, that trend. A study by 125 scholars conducted for the US military discovered that the twenty first century world was much more complex and dangerous than its predecessors. America's role in coping with this complexity was 'vital yet limited.' In a rapidly evolving milieu, America's security-related 'prescription, policies, and strategies tend to lag woefully behind' the times [137]. The environment was characterised by a combination of new power-centres rising among states and the diffusion of power among increasing numbers and varieties of non-state actors. This dynamic landscape was generating strategic uncertainties over which the mechanism and efficacy of exerting American influence was unclear [138]. Protecting and advancing US interests in this security environment would grow even more challenging in the future. The study identified trends transforming the global political backdrop:

- Global economic power being redistributed from the West to the 'Rest'
- The partial emergence of a multipolar world
- An information revolution leaving modern societies vulnerable

- The acceleration of an energy and environmental security ‘tipping point’
- Challenges originating in many fragile states and ungoverned spaces
- Terrorism’s increasingly transnational dimensions
- The character of conflict changing from conventional to irregular and ‘hybrid’ warfare, and
- The potential further proliferation of nuclear and biological weapons [139]

The 2008 ‘Wall Street meltdown’ and the consequent global recession reminded everyone that economic power was ‘the bedrock of sustainable military and political power’ [140]. After five centuries of Western domination, power was now flowing to other parts of the planet, especially Asia. Countries hitherto on the fringes of the global economic/financial core, especially China, had become central to its productive patterns, and resources from these centres were flowing outwards to recapitalise developed countries’ financial sectors. The replacement of the G7/8 by the G20 as the premier global governance forum reflected and reinforced this trend. ‘While America will remain the single most important actor, especially militarily, its relative power has declined together with its political and moral influence’ [141]. However, if America was no longer the centre of a unipolar order, neither were Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) able or willing to act as power-centres responsible for maintaining a stable multipolar system.

The world was, thus, in the cusp of transition between orders, experiencing political flux in a ‘nonpolar’ milieu, with fluidity inflicting uncertainty on a system bereft of the definition and clarity of preceding decades. The international security system was rapidly evolving, but ‘toward what’ remained unclear [142]. Profound uncertainties over the future notwithstanding, the study identified Sino-US relations as an area of ‘critical foreign policy challenge’. The difficulty resided in a China which generally acted in a restrained and reassuring manner while developing advanced military capabilities and expanding its regional and global influence. Having defied Western predictions of political-economic collapse or substantial change in the 1990s following the Soviet fission, China had reformed itself economically to generate sustained growth without political reforms.

Smart diplomacy combined with military modernisation had raised China’s profile as a major power. A more powerful China would heavily impact on regional and systemic security. Instead of formally identifying China as either a partner or an adversary, America had hitherto sought to take advantage of China’s growing economy and influence while hedging against its ‘emergence as a future threat’ [143]. Washington would have to develop a more nuanced approach while building on the ‘hedging while engaging’ strategy [144]. The study’s authors urged America to welcome ‘restrained and responsible Chinese behaviour’, while noting that Washington ‘must also recognize and prepare for the more complex policy challenges a strong China will pose’ [145].

China, however, was not the only issue in an environment being transformed by the convergence of diverse dynamics. Constant global engagement using ‘smart power’ was needed to restore and maintain American leadership [146]. The way

ahead was charted by an influential group of analysts including senior officials in the outgoing Bush Administration and others being inducted into its successor [147]. They pointed out that

Ongoing shifts in geopolitical power from west to east make the Asia-Pacific region more important to the United States today than ever before. The region is already an engine of the global economy, and major Asian countries are becoming global economic and political actors. Yet, as Asia's importance has grown over the last decades, Washington has often been focused elsewhere. The Obama administration needs a more active approach to the Asia-Pacific region that recognizes the new geopolitical realities and positions the United States to deal effectively with the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Such a strategy must build upon America's long-standing positive engagement in Asia and articulate a vision that can advance US interests and attract support from countries in the region [148].

To this end, America must

- Reassert strategic presence
- Maintain strong bilateral ties
- Articulate a realistic and pragmatic China policy and support a stable peace in the Taiwan Strait
- Sustain military engagement and forward presence
- Engage more actively in regional and multilateral fora
- Prevent nuclear proliferation and promote nuclear stability and disarmament
- Counter radical Islam
- Broaden the agenda/strengthen American soft power
- Cooperate on non-traditional security challenges, and
- Promote open and free trade [149]

As the Obama Administration took office, these objectives established the framework for America's approach to East Asia, and to China specifically.

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