

Leveraging Regional Partners

On “US Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and US National Security Strategy for East Asia”

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Writing in 2013, Robert Ross correctly predicted the rise of China as the leading focus of US grand strategy. But Ross’s opposition to strategic partnerships with mainland Asian nation ignores the essential benefits these nations could provide in US grand strategy vis-à-vis China.

Grand strategy “is a nation-state’s theory about how to produce security for itself. Grand strategy focuses on military threats, because these are the most dangerous, and military remedies because these are the most costly.”¹ Writing early in President Barack Obama’s second term, Robert R. Ross argued in the pages of this journal that the United States was charting an unwise course in its grand strategy to balance effectively against a rising China.²

Today the strategic setting differs somewhat, and crucial questions must be asked: What are the critical pieces in assessing a US grand strategy toward a rising China? To what extent does Ross’s analysis reflect the current strategic environment? He correctly identified China’s rise as the chief focus of US grand strategy. But from the vantage point of the start of the third decade of the twenty-first century, Ross’s argument against a focus on mainland partnerships has lost a degree of efficacy. The military certainly is the primary tool in preparing for the possibility of conflict between great powers. Considering the military instrument in isolation, however, could prompt the United States to overlook the strategic advantages of mainland Asian partners.

Ross’s central contention in “US Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and US National Security Strategy for East Asia” was that balance-of-power politics have been the mainstay of US grand strategy for nearly two and half centuries. Further, he argued the Obama administration’s efforts to balance against China were misguided in their focus on mainland strategic partnerships rather than regional maritime partners. The primary “strategic imperative” for the United States, he wrote, has consistently been “a divided Europe and a divided East Asia, lest a regional hegemon develop the capability and the ambition to reach across the oceans and challenge US security.”³

For much of our history, he added, we managed to balance regional competitors against each other. But following World War II, the United States “could no longer rely on balance-of-power politics to maintain its security by dividing its flanking regions. Instead, it would have to directly involve itself in European and East Asian politics.”⁴ Moving the analysis to the present, Ross noted a need for the United States to act intentionally in East Asia. He claimed this effort centered on military modernization and strategic partnerships with maritime nations.

Grand strategy rises above the debate and discord of the foreign policy concern du jour and takes a long view in considering how best to protect a state’s interests. This *longue durée* approach to strategic thinking is exemplified in George Kennan’s assessment of American prospects vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

Writing under a pseudonym—one that failed to shield his identity—in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* in 1947, Kennan assessed, “it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies. . . . The possibility remains (and in the opinion of this writer it is a strong one) that Soviet power, like the capitalist world of its conception, bears within it the seeds of its own decay, and that the sprouting of these seeds is well advanced.”⁵

The basic logic of the Cold War was thus set: contain Soviet expansion and wait out its self-inflicted implosion. Although Kennan disagreed with aspects of the Truman Doctrine that emerged contemporaneously with his “X article” and that set the foundations for US strategy in the Cold War, in the words of John Lewis Gaddis, Kennan’s “ideas, more than those of anyone else, did provide the intellectual rationale upon which it was based.”⁶ Kennan identified the threat and recognized the need for a long-term and concentrated response.

The first step in grand strategy, therefore, is to assess the key threats to a state’s security. While states face myriad challenges, for a leading state in the international system, the prospect of great power war and the repercussions of being on the losing side stand preeminent. Ross assessed this strategic imperative, arguing “unless balanced, China could achieve regional hegemony,” the very outcome Ross suggests the United States, buffered by two great protective moats, has sought to avoid since the country’s founding.⁷

Through the lens of grand strategy, this evaluation is not only correct but has not changed in the years since Ross wrote his analysis. Russia re-

mains essentially a disturber rather than a disrupter, while China has the potential to upset America's international standing.

Russia's actions, including the annexation of Crimea and active attempts to influence foreign elections, demonstrate a desire to increase its footprint in the international system. But the system itself, or more specifically the rules that govern it and determine the distribution of gains within it, face little threat of upheaval from Moscow. Russia is and will remain a strategic concern for the United States—it retains a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and has a robust nuclear arsenal.

Nevertheless, Russia's capacity to outpace the United States in any meaningful metric and ultimately disrupt the international order from which the United States benefits is doubtful. China, alternatively, has the economic potential to be a true disrupter, placing the United States and China in what Graham Allison calls "the Thucydides Trap."⁸

Once the greatest strategic threats are established, the next step in grand strategy development is addressing how to best meet those threats. Ross identified China as the chief, long-term threat to US security. He stressed the importance of continued modernization of US military capabilities and called for the management of strategic partnerships in the region. His emphasis on modernization rings true today, especially considering the growth of Chinese military capabilities since his writing, including an expanding nuclear arsenal, blue-water naval capabilities, and advancements in hypersonic weapons. Ross's treatment of managing strategic partnerships, however, can benefit from insights from the last decade.

Ross argued the Obama administration's pivot to Asia was misguided, not in its key strategic emphasis on the region, but in its strategic priorities within the region. Ross critiqued the administration's focus on mainland partners—including Vietnam, Cambodia, and South Korea—as opposed to prioritizing maritime partners in the region. US actions with mainland partners, Ross argued, were "neither necessary nor effective . . . [and would] ultimately be costly to US interests because they [would] destabilize US-China cooperation."⁹ Further, they would "elicit increased Chinese suspicion of US intentions and greater Chinese resistance to US interests in East Asia and elsewhere."¹⁰

Ross's critique is prudent for its recognition that strategy entails trade-offs. Shedding the strategic light on one area, by necessity, leaves another area in the dark, and any strategic emphasis comes with an opportunity cost. Ross cites Walter Lippmann's admonition that "a comfortable surplus of power" need be held in reserve when considering a state's commitments.¹¹ Through this logic, Ross contends strategic partnerships with Vietnam,

Cambodia, and South Korea “cannot enhance US security. Because both [Indochina and South Korea] are on China’s immediate periphery, US naval power cannot effectively challenge Chinese coercive power. The coercive capability of China’s contiguous ground force capability . . . cannot be adequately mitigated by US offshore presence.”¹²

But Ross’s critique of partnerships with South Korea and the countries of Indochina overemphasizes the military facets of the current stage of US competition with China. The United States must unite all appropriate instruments of national power to counter China’s ability to rewrite the rules of the international system to its advantage. In this sense, strategic partnerships with regional mainland states, in addition to the maritime powers Ross identified, can limit China’s freedom to maneuver diplomatically and economically.

Economics is, after all, at the heart of the matter. The miracle of the Chinese economy has been the driving force—to paraphrase Thucydides—behind the growth of China and the fear this growth sparks in the United States. As Paul Kennedy observed more than 30 years ago, “the relative strengths of the leading nations in world affairs never remain constant, principally because of the uneven rate of growth among different societies and of the technological and organizational breakthroughs which bring a greater advantage to one society than to another.”¹³

Add to this Robert Gilpin’s connection between power transitions and war and the assessment China’s rise relative to the United States warrants concern. “The law of uneven growth continues to redistribute power. . . . Disequilibrium replaces equilibrium, and the world moves toward a new round of hegemonic conflict. It has always been thus and always will be, until men either destroy themselves or learn to develop an effective mechanism of peaceful change.”¹⁴ Power transition theorists tell us to be concerned, and they are correct, but grand strategy need not wait for the transition to occur. In strategy, the adversary gets a vote; in this case, the United States gets a vote in responding to China’s rise.

Writing more than 15 years before his 2013 *SSQ* analysis, Ross and coauthor Andrew Nathan noted a dualistic icon of Chinese power. “The Great Wall is a symbol of weakness,” they observed, “because it signals susceptibility to invasion, and of strength, because it represents economic and cultural superiority and an ability to ward off invasion with feats of engineering and vigilance.”¹⁵ The Chinese economy—in some ways the modern Great Wall—likewise portends both strengths and weaknesses to China.

China’s annual economic growth was the envy of the world for the last 30 years, and China’s role within the global economy has only expanded

since Ross's 2013 analysis. Yet Chinese economic growth has slowed considerably in the last eight years. Emerging market debt crises led to the crash of the Shanghai stock market and the flight of \$1 trillion in foreign reserves from China in 2015. Moreover, the complete impact of COVID-19 on the Chinese economy will remain unknown for some time.¹⁶

According to the World Bank, by 2019 economic growth had slowed to just 5.95 percent—an enviable number for most major states in the international system, but one that bodes challenges for a nation that saw years of growth above 10 percent.¹⁷ The economic realities of COVID-19 drove Chinese economic growth to just 2.3 percent in 2020, China's worst annual growth since 1976. In face of this economic downturn, China is experiencing growing domestic demographic concerns and the burden of financing the vast Belt and Road Initiative and increased military modernization.

The current strategic setting is not a replay of the Cold War, and the United States should not use Cold War strategy as a playbook. Nevertheless, Kennan's insights about the long-term implications of a bankrupt political or economic system offer useful tools for today's strategist. An effective US grand strategy would exploit weaknesses such as China's declining growth but would best be done through a true pivot to Asia. The United States is in a better position to do so today than it was when Ross wrote eight years ago.

In leaving behind the wars of the Middle East and Central Asia and better leveraging Western Europe to balance itself against Russia, the United States can approach a rising China with the surplus of power Lippman suggested. This Asia-focused strategy would actively engage Asian mainland and maritime partners, recognizing the United States has considerable advantages in the region and acknowledging partnerships offer much beyond the strategic setting of a potential military clash.

The key strategic tradeoffs for a grand strategy toward China thus move beyond Ross's concern for tradeoffs between potential Asian mainland versus maritime partners and toward a discussion of tradeoffs between different instruments of national power. This discussion emphasizes economic and diplomatic outreach to mainland partners and the costs and benefits of a regional focus, shifting away from the United States Central Command and United States European Command areas of responsibility to give pride of strategic place to United States Indo-Pacific Command. **SSQ**

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Notes

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