Obama and Trump’s marine machismo
in the Indo-Pacific

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Introduction

The return of the United States to the Indo-Pacific is one of the most significant elements of former President Barack Obama’s foreign policy legacy. He ordered a bold alteration of course, in the midst of an economic storm, to save the crumbling maritime empire against continental China’s advancing influence. As will be shown, this occurred as part of Obama’s efforts to rejuvenate the United States’ Asia Pacific presence, a strategy his successor Donald Trump built on throughout the relabelled Indo-Pacific. Even so, the United States has long recognised itself as the dominant regional power; as far back as the 1950s, Washington’s strategic community identified the Pacific as an “American Lake”. At that time the United States was consumed by the war in Korea and throughout the 1960s it fought in Vietnam. US troop numbers in East Asia peaked around this time, at around 800,000 by the late 1960s. It was only in the 1970s, after the Sino-Soviet split, that it temporarily retreated from the region.

In 1963 President John F. Kennedy announced the establishment of an “Atlantic community” by which the United States would focus on strengthening its economic and security relations with Europe, while remaining conscious of the threat of Chinese communism to ‘Vietnam, Free China, Korea, India, Pakistan, Thailand, Greece, Turkey, and Iran’. His last speech that remained undelivered due to his assassination that year contained proposals to use these countries on the ‘periphery of the Communist world’ to contain China, ‘infusing 3.5 million allied troops along the Communist frontier at one-tenth the cost of maintaining a comparable number of American soldiers’. Immediately after Kennedy’s death, Roger Hillman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, spearheaded an “Open Door” policy with China. Hillman wanted to restart trade with China both for the economic health of the US west coast and in order to see a ‘fatter China’, because he believed that ‘a fat country is less a threat to peace than a lean one’.

China has always been a key US focus in the region, and today, from the realms of currency and cyberspace to trade and future technologies, China is challenging American power in almost every conceivable sphere. A recent decline in US authority over global affairs has gradually led twenty-first-century American presidents to once again move from courting China to confronting and containing it. This increasingly demands the direct application of US hard power. In the 1950s and 1960s, US presidents depended largely on the army to implement their Pacific policies. From 2009 Obama made the US Navy the linchpin in his Asia Pacific strategy, a policy choice to which President Donald Trump from 2017 added more marine machismo.

This chapter argues that, as more than a foreign policy shift, Obama’s “Pivot” to Asia from around 2011 represented a fundamental reorientation of the US Navy from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This charting of a new course by the US Navy was not only aimed at revitalising US foreign policy but also stemming its own decline. The chapter explores Obama’s and Trump’s maritime approaches in the Indo-Pacific against the backdrop of the continual rise of China’s Navy. The chapter also asks whether a continued reliance on Mahanian tenets – in particular, fleet engagements and securing overseas bases to control maritime domains – is sufficient for Washington to protect its empire from continental China.

Will history remember Obama’s “Rebalance” to Asia as a masterstroke, or condemn him – perhaps along with Trump – for restricting American strategic choices in the maritime domain by failing to anticipate the technological revolution in land logistics, and neglecting Halford Mackinder’s predictions of the rise of Eurasia? It is argued that while China is fashioning the future world order with bricks and mortar across the Eurasian landmass, America is busy hoisting flags and bunting throughout the maritime “marginals”.

A bold alteration of course

After defeating the Soviet Union in the Cold War the United States shifted its gaze towards the Middle East, launching regional wars at will. As Monteiro observes, ‘the US has been at war for 13 of the 22 years since the end of the Cold War. The first two decades of unipolarity, which make up less than 10% of US history account for more than 25% of the nation’s total time at war.’

The economic and financial crisis of 2008, North Korean nuclear posturing, and the rise of China led maritime America to rethink its involvement in the Middle East and Afghanistan as the primary arenas of its post-2001 “war on terror”. In November 2009, President Barack Obama proclaimed himself ‘America’s first Pacific President’ and declared the United States an ‘Asia-Pacific nation’. This self-labelling exercise in Tokyo was aimed at announcing to Asian nations that the United States was refocusing on the region after some years of perceived neglect.
In 2011, the Obama administration articulated this reorientation of US foreign policy as its “Pivot” to Asia. This was a shift away from the ‘Middle East-centric legacy of the Bush era’ and one with roots in history; Senator Gale W. McGee predicted in 1959, that

in the time of those who listen to me today, our real concern in the world may not be Moscow, but possibly Peiping [Beijing] or New Delhi; indeed, what was once the Atlantic age of history will be swept away, or at least supplemented, by the new Pacific age of history.

Writing in *Foreign Policy*, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insisted on directing US resources in a ‘smart and systematic’ manner to the Asia Pacific region. Relatedly, Clinton assured APEC members of the American commitment to establish an elaborate trans-Pacific network of institutions and relationships in 2011. Despite maintaining a conciliatory tone towards China, Obama spoke about building multilateral alliances and strengthening existing and new bilateral relations in the region, which signalled a clear intention to try to limit China’s increasing influence. Yet the Obama administration refrained from taking firm action to halt Chinese base-building projects in the South China Sea. It was careful to avoid antagonising Beijing because the American economy, in its recovery phase after the crash of 2008, relied heavily on China as its biggest trading partner. Furthermore, the pace and scale of Washington’s planned “Pivot” away from the Middle East and Europe was held up due to the Russian moves into Crimea and Ukraine.

The most crucial element in Obama’s policy realignment was the placement of maritime geography at the centre of international security discourse. It reinvigorated the US sea services trio of Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, giving them a fresh raison d’être to secure maritime commons and reassert American hegemony. In 2012, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, the US Navy Chief of Naval Operations argued that the Asia Pacific was a maritime region and that sea power underwrote America’s rebalancing to the region. The Navy got the green light to curtail the growing maritime ambitions of China’s People’s Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) in particular, and effectively counter its anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies. Plans were soon afoot to position 60 per cent of US naval assets, including the Carrier Strike Group and Amphibious Ready Group, in the Asia Pacific theatre by 2020.

Towards the very end of Obama’s time in office, in 2015, the US Navy revised its 2007 report, ‘A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower’, to incorporate the economic and political changes underway in the world. The 2007 report posited a liberal international order in which the global maritime commons was policed by a coalition of US-led partners. The revised strategy was more explicit about the capacity of the US Navy to ‘wage war and prevail’. Obama’s trust in the
Navy and the push to pool the resources of regional partners inspired medium and small maritime powers in the region to increase their naval spending. As a result, submarines became the most sought-after vessel in the region. As of 2019 it is estimated that 228 full-sized submarines operate in the East and South China Seas, and that within a decade this number will rise to 300.\textsuperscript{14}

The introduction of modern, quiet vessels has changed the operational picture in the region with Australia, India, Pakistan, Japan, South Korea and Indonesia expanding and modernising their fleets. In February 2019, Australia signed a deal worth US$30 billion to build twelve attack submarines with a French shipbuilding firm. India ordered six advanced submarines at a cost of over US$5 billion.\textsuperscript{15} China has more than seventy submarines which are likely to grow to eighty by 2030. The United States is also deploying in the region its nuclear attack submarine armed with sub-launched torpedoes and anti-ship missiles. Another important outcome of Obama’s Asia Pacific policy was the gradual emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the centre of gravity in the international geostrategic discourse.

The Indo-Pacific as an economic concept has existed for centuries. The southernmost region of Vietnam under French colonial rule, for example, was known as Cochin-China to signify the connectivity between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. During the Cold War, the United States kept India out of the Asia Pacific matrix and after the Sino-Indian war of 1962, which helped to widen the Sino-Soviet wedge, American strategy did not envisage any significant role for India. Washington rarely did much to oppose India’s demand for the Indian Ocean as a “zone of peace” and neutrality. However, as the region’s perceived geostrategic relevance to the United States increased, not least during the years of the Obama administration, the need to expand the imagined boundaries of the Asia Pacific correspondingly increased to accommodate India, a formidable naval power. This new Indo-Pacific was to be a geostrategic entity stretching from East Africa in the Indian Ocean, to the western and central Pacific, including Japan and Australia, to the west coast of the United States.

Officially, the term Indo-Pacific was first articulated by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at Honolulu in October 2010. Clinton referred to an integrated theatre where maritime activities could be coordinated between the United States and its allies.\textsuperscript{16} The Australian Defence White Paper of 2013 consolidated the idea by stressing India’s trade and strategic connectivity with the Pacific.\textsuperscript{17} The US Pacific Command, up until 2017, used the term “Indo-Asia-Pacific”. However, as the term Indo-Pacific continued to gather legitimacy scholarly and media articles started using it liberally.\textsuperscript{18} Since its entry into the White House in 2017 the administration of President Donald Trump has furthered the use of the term “Indo-Pacific” in official policy discourse.

The Indo-Pacific is an important concept to the United States, not least within the context of what were identified by the Pentagon in 2018 as the five main threats to national security: China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and violent
extremist organisations. Four of these are located in the Indo-Pacific.\textsuperscript{19} As such, a key part of the strategic logic behind the creation of the Indo-Pacific is to counter the growing Chinese vision of Eurasia, bound by the so-called “Silk Road Spirit”, a notion designed to encapsulate Beijing’s visions to bind together a vast and disparate economic-political-cultural landscape.\textsuperscript{20} With Europe in recent years demonstrating some preference (though cautiously at times) for conjoining with this continental landmass rather than limiting itself to the transatlantic connect, it has recently become imperative for the United States to utilise the Indian Ocean region to ward off isolation and return that maritime realm back to global discourse.

Another key reason for Washington to prioritise the Indo, over the Asia, Pacific is to better reflect the United States’ deep entrenchment throughout the former. The US Indo-Pacific Command (renamed in 2018) is based at Hawaii. In the Western Pacific the United States has a large naval base in Guam which can berth aircraft carriers, as well as the Andersen airbase from where strategic B-52 bombers operate. In June 2018, Guam hosted the ‘Malabar’ series of exercises in which the naval forces of the United States, India and Japan participated. The US Marine expeditionary forces are based at Okinawa and the US Navy operates a base at Yokosuka, both in Japan. These forces also enjoy basing facilities at Palawan in the Philippines and Singapore. In addition, the United States occupies Diego Garcia, a base in the middle of the Indian Ocean equipped to operate bombers. In 2016 the United States signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement with India, to provide its units refuelling and replenishment facilities in India.

Freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific

On becoming President in January 2017, Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the vast, twelve-member Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) without presenting an alternative economic roadmap capable of competing for influence with new Chinese-led regional multilateral frameworks, notably the Belt and Road Initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. This singular move generated concerns within an American foreign policy establishment and strategic community increasingly committed to treating China as a peer competitor.

This early apparent disengagement by Washington from the Indo-Pacific equally worried Asian partners who hoped to see a reinforced US naval presence in regional waters, especially the South China Sea where Beijing had begun an extensive island-building programme. The Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), however, openly outlined the need to respond more assertively to a ‘revisionist’ China. While raising some concerns about the future direction of the US–China relationship, the NSS also helped allay fears that Washington planned to disengage from the region.
Importantly, and much like that of Obama which ordered six freedom of navigation operations (FNOs) from August 2013 to January 2017, the Trump administration in its first two years in office relied on American sea power to signal intent in the Indo-Pacific. It sanctioned enhanced FNOs by the US Navy in the disputed South China Sea, where claims and counter-claims over island sovereignty and maritime delimitation, involving China, Brunei, Vietnam, the Philippines and others, constitute among the most complex political-legal territorial disputes in the world. The escalation of these disputes has the potential to generate serious disruptions in the free flow of trade and the safety of maritime navigation.

For instance, in September 2018, while the United States and China were engaged in talks to resolve their ongoing trade dispute, the USS Decatur sailed into the Gaven and Johnson reefs in the Sparkly Islands. In response, China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy dispatched its destroyer Luyang to warn the US warship. The two vessels came within tens of metres of one another, endangering the prospects for the Cold Peace which exists between the two powers. In January and February 2019, the US Navy completed two FNOs near Mischief Reef on which China has installed significant military structures and resources, provoking further Chinese indignation against perceived infringement of its sovereignty.

Like most coastal states, in accordance with the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China retaliates against the warships of other nations which engage in naval exercises and surveillance activities within its 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zones (EEZs), including those of the United States. Washington, as a non-signatory to UNCLOS, maintains that its navy has a right to conduct military activities in EEZs without informing or seeking the coastal state’s consent. Despite its close security partnership with the United States, India also fails to agree with the US interpretation of UNCLOS and the movement of foreign warships within national EEZs. To some degree at least, the “unsafe interactions” – bullying and counter bullying at sea – raise the probability of war between the two, especially from incidents in what we might call security “grey zones”. These include incidents involving China’s coast guard, or its so-called “maritime militia” or “third navy” which is constituted primarily of Chinese fishing boats widely considered to be acting under orders from Beijing to provide a seemingly benign but highly visible naval presence in the region to help advance Beijing’s security interests. Categorising the Chinese fishing vessels as combatants is fraught with danger as it puts severe restrictions on legitimate economic activity by Chinese fishermen in their own waters, and is likely to exacerbate anti-Americanism in China.

US actions in the Indo-Pacific are also testing the professionalism of its naval personnel who are now patrolling in a more challenging environment than they are used to. Increased stresses on naval crews were evident in 2017 when two US Navy destroyers, USS Fitzgerald and USS McCain, were involved in separate collisions with civilian vessels in the waters around Japan and Singapore.
respectively, resulting in the deaths of seventeen American sailors and significant damage to the image and reputation of US Navy professionalism. According to the *Stars and Stripes* military newspaper, "The Japan-based 7th Fleet – which included both destroyers – was undermanned. Sailors were working 100-hour weeks, cutting corners on training and repairs just to keep pace with their tasking." Commenting on the incident, Seth Cropsey argued that ‘[t]he deployable battle force, at 276, is far smaller than what is needed to meet the demand. And it isn’t growing. So, the navy has looked for other ways to answer the call.’

One way to strengthen the United States’ presence throughout the Indo-Pacific is to extend the periods of patrol for ships deployed in the region and the other is involving friendly navies to share the burden. While the former option is an internal matter for the United States’ Department of the Navy, the latter is more complex as it involves weaving together an integrated maritime security architecture. It could, however, enable the navies of the United States, India, Japan and Australia – the members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) – to operate in an interoperable environment.

The Quad, composed of four democracies, remains fragile because all of its members are intricately tied to the Chinese economy making their oppositions to China inherently timid. India is a founder-member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which funds BRI projects, and yet New Delhi opposes the BRI. India is an important member of Quad, designed to contain maritime China, but is also a member of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) that supports continental China’s Eurasian connectivity. Similar contradictions are evident in Japan and Australia.

Over the years, the United States has capitalised on growing regional dissent against China’s increasing power, in an attempt to build a credible trans-Indo-Pacific security and economic architecture that might prevent Beijing from bringing US allies and partners into mega infrastructure projects such as those included within the BRI and funded by Beijing’s AIIB. In its first two years in office, the Trump administration has sought to rejuvenate American commitment to Indo-Pacific allies by launching the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), promising an additional US$1.5 billion to the region. Under Trump in 2018, the annual Malabar naval exercises between Japan, India and the United States were hosted for the first time by the US naval base at Guam, where Nimitz-class, nuclear-powered super-carriers participated. The Malabar series started as a bilateral exercise between the US and Indian navies in 1992, with the Japanese navy added in 2007. The next US president may invite Australia in to make the series an annual event of the Quad. Regardless, these continuities show that successive American presidents have contributed to a long-term US naval strategy which envisages controlling the Indo-Pacific sea space with the help of friends and allies. To fully appreciate Washington’s need to gather regional allies, one always has to assess China’s naval growth of the past decade.
Continental China’s maritime power

As of early 2019, China’s PLAN is the second largest navy in the world. The US Navy continues to enjoy an asymmetric advantage over China’s in military maritime capabilities, including in aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, anti-submarine warfare and amphibious capabilities. But with the speed at which the PLAN is constructing state-of-the-art ships, Chinese naval power is likely to inch closer to that of the US Navy before 2050. Between 1990 and 2010, ten destroyers were launched from Chinese shipyards. Between 2010 and 2018, by contrast, China produced twenty-four. China has also built an indigenous aircraft carrier and by 2030 the Chinese navy is expected to possess three more aircraft carriers;100–110 destroyers and frigates ranging from 5,000 to 12,000 tons; around eighty submarines, including sixteen SSNs and eight or more SSBNs; and eight or more large landing ships in the amphibious category.

In April 2019 China celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the PLAN, with the main attraction of the naval parade being the Nanchang (101), 10,000 ton destroyer with the capacity to become equipped with a railgun. The Chinese navy’s modernisation is aimed at protecting China’s trade and coastline and for expeditionary roles. At the moment, China’s naval force is incapable of defeating the US Navy but it is already puncturing its vanity and signalling to the world that American sea power is no longer invincible.

Washington’s strategy, meanwhile, centres on neutralising the Chinese navy’s anti-access and area-denial capabilities (precision strike capabilities that restrict the movement of US naval platforms) with its own naval assets. Washington also seeks to encourage allies to develop area-denial “bubbles” of their own in various choke points. Ashley Tellis argues that Japan and South Korea are capable of restricting Chinese naval movements in the Korea Straits, and that the Philippines/Taiwan and Indonesia could similarly constrain its activities through the Luzon Straits and its access to the Sulu and Celebes Seas, respectively.

The Chinese navy may be gaining in numbers, but its experience at sea is for the moment relatively limited. Chinese sailors have no experience of naval battle and are completely new to carrier-borne air operations. However, the American navy’s continuous presence in the South China Sea is providing them with valuable experience of regional operations, and an opportunity to test their latest weapons. In December 2016 for example, a Chinese naval vessel picked up an underwater US spy drone which they refused to return. The fear is now that the Indo-Pacific is soon to become an arena in which live artificial-intelligence weapons will be tested. Equally, however, often forgotten is that in the post-Cold War world the United States has enjoyed absolute sea control, operating largely without fear of significant challenges to its dominance in all theatres of operations. This situation is likely to change as China’s naval strength expands.
Beijing’s more aggressive, or at least more assertive, behaviours in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean are in fact in some respects benefiting the United States, leaving the likelihood of a large-scale Sino-US confrontation at sea more remote. Indeed, much like New Delhi’s recent naval investments, Chinese developments are also helping preserve the current maritime order. Chinese construction activities in the South China Sea and its corresponding naval build-up, for example, have given the United States an opportunity and justification to reinforce its maritime capabilities. Without a real or perceived threat of China’s naval build-up, Washington would also find it difficult to mobilise regional actors and encourage arms purchases. In short, then, the still-gargantuan US Navy needs a worthy enemy and at the moment China is a very useful candidate. An overstretched United States across the maritime commons is also conducive for China, as it allows relatively tension-free involvement in building Eurasian land routes.

However, a limited naval battle between China and a regional actor would add to ongoing nautical neurosis in the Indo-Pacific, and this possibility cannot be ruled out. Navalists in some European countries as well as the United States are using Chinese aggression as a pretext to demand more from their governments, notably in Paris and London. ‘The dormant overseas territories held by France in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific have suddenly come alive. The [British] Royal Navy has woken up from its imperial grave to open its new military base in Bahrain.’

Transcontinental trade corridors and maritime order

In terms of commercial maritime capabilities, China is the world’s largest shipbuilder, boasts the third-largest merchant marine and the largest number of vessels; and claims almost 700,000 fishing vessels. In addition, China accounts for around a quarter of the world’s container trade. Indeed, ‘almost all the steel boxes shipped on the world’s oceans are made in China.’ It is widely argued that China owes its post-1970s industrial success to the open trading regime and transport channels provided and protected by the United States. China, indeed, is often blamed for being a “free rider”. ‘Much of the security of that trade across the Pacific is the gift of America. China “free-rides” on the protection provided by the United States Pacific Fleet [and] America’s enforcement of the rules of sea-based activity.’

Yet this argument overlooks the fact that “rising” China itself, by taking on the burden of global manufacturing and shipbuilding, has played a large role in ensuring that the world’s oceans continue to be the mainstay of global trade and commerce. By erecting modern shipyards and ports, China has aided the sustainability of the maritime order. It is estimated that the Atlantic Ocean’s share of global traffic dropped from nearly 40 per cent in 1992, to 32 per cent in 2012. Over
the same time period, the share accounted for by the Pacific Ocean rose from 35 per cent to 39 per cent. ‘Meanwhile, ship traffic on the Indian Ocean and China Sea now make up 25 to 30 percent of global traffic, up from 17 percent in 1992.’

China is also the biggest importer of dry bulk commodities and crude oil from the Gulf, as well as the largest exporter of finished products. It is flawed to label China (or any other maritime actor) in such an interlinked global trading network as a “free rider”, then, because increased traffic at sea means more revenue for Western, including American and British, firms that control the insurance and reinsurance of sea trade. Control of the marine service industry also gives the United States the power to unilaterally impose sanctions on other countries; currently, the United States alone is able to so effectively pressure global ports and freighting companies, for example, to deny insurance cover to Iranian vessels transporting oil and other goods. The United States is also the only actor able to threaten the Belgium-based Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Communications (SWIFT) financial messaging service, to keep Iranian banks out of their global financial network. With US hegemony now more contested, however, the UK, France, Germany, Russia, China and Iran launched INSTEX (Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges) to bypass unilateral US trade sanctions on Iran. In 2016 China established a train service to Iran, increasing the prospect of an alternative supply chain completely independent of US-controlled sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

Chinese naval and commercial fleets are not the only instruments by which China is increasingly disrupting the US-led maritime order. Washington’s ability to underwrite global shipping and the pre-eminence of its navy to protect sea trade is under stress from Chinese investments in alternative land-based trade routes which bypass US naval protection and its insurance industry. Land-based transportation networks across Eurasia will not deliver an era of shipless oceans, but in the coming decades high speed land networks are likely to draw a significant proportion of international cargo away from the oceans. The impact of competitive land routes on the future of the oceanic order, as well as US maritime hegemony, is being overlooked by much of the American strategic community.

It should be noted that before its departure from office in 2017, the Obama administration sensed this erosion of maritime American power but was unable to see that the troubles were emerging primarily from land. To tackle Chinese challenges to US command of the oceans, Obama and then Trump both identified the Indo-Pacific as the primary strategic theatre, relying almost exclusively on the navy. Mahanian sea power theories, which focus exclusively on commanding the maritime domain and controlling global commerce, have served America well in the past. Yet Halford Mackinder saw Europe and Asia as an amalgam, and believed that the key to global power was ultimately located in the Eurasian landmass rather than in major SLOCs. Mackinder advocated controlling this “World Island”, but
not necessarily through military means or by engineering strategic splits within the continental landmass. He believed this vast landmass could either be controlled from Eastern Europe or from maritime “marginals” – seas which border the continents such as the Baltic Sea or the Arabian Sea. In early 2019, it is clearer than ever that Washington cannot continue to shy away from positively engaging with the “heartland” of Eurasia, to establish an improved maritime–continental equilibrium. The mobility advantage that sea power enjoyed over land power is unlikely to hold for much longer, as drones, hyper-links and bullet trains become the new carriers of global online commerce. Moreover, the three major regional continental powers of Germany, Russia and China are unlikely to waste this opportunity which now sits on the horizon after centuries, and certainly not to help keep the United States’ maritime order intact. Retaining hundreds of overseas military bases and carrier-borne fighter jets, which can penetrate deep inside a land-locked country with precision guided munitions, cannot guarantee the United States a continental edge; the United States spent around US$6 trillion on the war on terror between 2001 and 2019, but struggles to save its empire. In contrast, China, which has spent less than US$50 billion so far on enhancing transcontinental connectivity, is bringing economies including those of Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Myanmar and many others into the global supply chain. It is also maintaining a judicious balance between its maritime ambitions and continental concerns.

The United States built a good rapport with central Asian states after the fall of Berlin Wall, before losing its advantage with its disastrous post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The result has been that China (as well as Russia) has been able to advance its Eurasian interests. Obama’s departure from the foreign policies of the Bush era was only partial; he lacked the vision to discard the relevance of the foreign wars he inherited and walked the beaten tracks by making the navy the fulcrum of US external engagements. Obama could not imagine new ways to interact with the world, and ultimately failed to devise a strategy to effectively engage with Eurasia.

Despite the “America First” rhetoric and his tirades against the so-called liberal international order, Donald Trump has so far been unable to overcome Washington’s war-syndrome which has afflicted almost all post-war presidents. Trump’s primary disagreement with the order is that Washington’s partners and allies of which it is constituted are not contributing enough to support it and, in the end, to fight America’s wars. Across his first two years, Trump also chose not to deviate from Obama’s concern with keeping the navy at the centre of US Indo-Pacific policy. The reassertion of sea power fits well with Trump’s unilateral and populist ideology; America’s maritime moorings are an emotive issue, and a useful political tool to whip up cultural nationalism. Yet Trump has so far proven devoid of ideas about how to make the world a more secure environment, and how to sustain US authority in a rapidly changing geopolitical climate.
Conclusion

This chapter has argued that in the transition between the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, little continuity was evident in their US re-involvement strategies in the Indo-Pacific. Some elements of the current policy of penetrating China’s Exclusive Economic Zones, and the territorial claims it makes in the South China Sea and elsewhere, were visible in President George W. Bush’s Asia Pacific strategy too. Efforts by Washington to build wider alliances in the region, with key partners like India, also started before the announcement in 2011 of Obama’s Pivot to Asia. The question now is over the extent to which the Trump administration in its remaining time in office, as well as Trump’s presidential successor, can sustain the United States’ regional naval involvement and retain the confidence of its Indo-Pacific allies.

Both Obama and Trump have pinned their hopes on the US Navy to save the US empire. Neither, to early 2019, has offered much in the way of new and innovative policy to rescue US strategy from the Mahanian trap which prevents it from exploring continental connectivity options that are more benevolent than retaining naval bases and maritime control. Their strategy has been aimed at ensuring that Washington uses its core competences to contain power shifts in the global political economy, which broadly speaking sees the centre of economic gravity shifting from West to East. However, this strategy is heavily skewed in favour of the maritime domain. Beyond actual war-fighting, Washington has few big ideas in its policy toolkit and, particularly since the election of Donald Trump as president in 2017, even fewer which find widespread acceptance among Washington’s international partners.

China’s naval build-up may be good for the revival of the US Navy, and for the profits of Washington’s arms industry, but the efficacy of the strategy in preserving US hegemony is less clear. Investments in the navy alone will not deliver strategic dividends to America. Engaging in hostile situations far from home will only continue to increase the financial burden on America and cause the Indo-Pacific region to become more prone to war. The continental powers cannot suck the oceans dry, but they are already diverting trade away from the primary SLOCs. The possibility of managing this fundamental shift in the international political economy without resorting to war is risked by blind faith at home in the United States’ maritime destiny. Mahanian bondage keeps Washington from recognising that a successful empire is unbound and unshackled from geographic confinements – maritime or continental.39

Notes


Marine machismo in the Indo-Pacific 239

28 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
39 I am grateful to Professor Inderjeet Parmar and Dr Oliver Turner for editing and refining the chapter, as well as helping to make the arguments presented more coherent and cogent.