



KGRI Working Papers

No.10

Destiny or Choice?: Why America's Relative Decline is still a
Myth (as for now)

Version1.0

August 2017

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Abstract

Existing literature on American grand strategy and America's relative decline has evolved around the question of the degree of America's global engagement. Unipolarity's unique impact on the international system and the significant policy relevance of this question has left this debate in a dichotomy between deep engagement and offshore balancing. However, the breadth of this grand topic has often made this intellectual debate conceptual, leaving behind numerous underlying assumptions that require reexamination. This paper therefore examines two large assumptions so as to identify factors that deserve more attention in order to enhance our understanding of American grand strategy. First, it analyzes the evolution of discussions on America's relative decline, which has cycled in intellectual debates since the 1970s. Next, I investigate the qualitative differences in conventional and unconventional security challenges. The analysis suggests that failed strategies with an incongruity in the means and ends produced discouraging results that exhausted national power. The future of America's unipolarity is a matter of America's own choice of an effective strategy. To that end, this paper underscores the importance of factors that shape America's global engagement, including the qualitative differences in threats as well as geographical differences.

Introduction

There is no shortage of debates over the future of the United States' unipolarity and its relative decline. The emergence of an isolationist President, Mr. Donald Trump, has accelerated this never-ending discussion. The existing literature on American grand strategy and America's relative decline is broad and profound. However, the breadth of this crucial yet grand topic has often made this intellectual debate conceptual, leaving out numerous underlying assumptions that require clarification and reexamination.

America's relative decline is often associated with the rise of China as an economic and military power.¹ As Robert Gilpin wrote, "hegemonic struggle have most frequently been triggered by the fear of ultimate decline and the perceived erosion of power."² Thus, the debates over America's relative decline often assumes a power transition between the United States and China, including confrontations related to such possible changes. This view that predicts conflicts over a power transition between the United States and China,³ suffers from a set of assumptions that presume that China's growth and rise will be definite. This assumption has been challenged by several Chinese and Asian experts who have illuminated the limits of Chinese

¹ Aaron Friedberg, for example, started his career with an interest in the relative decline of superpowers, as illuminated by his monumental book *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. His current research focus on Sino-U.S. relations appears to have been influenced by his original research interests. His more recent writings on Sino-U.S. relations include *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* Norton, 2011, and 'The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?', *International Security*, 30:2, 7-45.

² Gilpin, Robert, *War and Change in International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 239.

³ See for example, Allison, Graham, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?", *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015; Allison, Graham, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017; and Mearsheimer, John, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton, 2001.

power⁴ as well as the fragility of China's growth.⁵ Other international relations scholars have also sought to reexamine such assumptions through the systemic analysis of relative power, indicating the flaws in the concept of polarity.⁶ Without clarifying the underlying assumptions, the acceleration of debates over America's relative decline could unnecessarily intensify tensions between the U.S. and China.

This paper is in line with existing intellectual discussions on American grand strategy but simultaneously seeks to enhance it by offering different perspectives that deserve attention. The existing literature has focused more on the degree to which the United States engages with the world. Barry Posen and Andrew Ross, for example, has highlighted that the schools of grand strategy could be broken down into four groups: neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security, and primacy.⁷ If we further categorize it into two large schools of thoughts, it could be divided into those that propose deep engagement and those that propose off-shore balancing.⁸ This is reflective of the difficulty in forming a consensus and support over America's commitment abroad in the post-Cold War era.⁹ The ascendance of President Trump to power illuminates this eroding public support over the United States' active role in the global order.

⁴ Shambough, David, *China Goes Global: A Partial Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁵ Auslin, Michael, *The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World's Most Dynamic Region*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017; Lutwark, Edward, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

⁶ Brooks, Stephen & Wohlforth, William (2015/16), 'The Rise and Fall of Great Powers in the Twenty First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position,' *International Security*, 40:3, 7-53.

⁷ Posen, Barry & Ross, Andrew (1996/97), 'Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,' *International Security*, 21:3, 5-53.

⁸ This dichotomy in the debates over American grand strategy has been confirmed by several scholars. See for example, Montgomery, Evan Braden (2014), 'Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of US Power Projection,' *International Security*, 38:4, 115-149.

⁹ Kupchan, Charles & Trubowitz, Paul (2007), 'Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States,' *International Security*, 32:2, 7-44; Kupchan, Charles & Trubowitz, Paul (2010), 'The Illusion of the Liberal Internationalism's Revival,' *International Security*, 35:1, 95-109; Trubowitz, Paul, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Some scholars have argued that even under the Obama administration, the President's grand strategy was closely associated with his domestic agenda, which required that less attention be paid to expensive commitments abroad.¹⁰ During the Cold War, despite the occasional emergence of debates over America's relative decline, the consensus on the necessity to sustain America's foreign commitments was not easily eroded with a clear rationale. However, the end of the Cold War has made it increasingly difficult to maintain and develop this consensus.

Furthermore, this focus on the degree of U.S. global engagement is often associated with the question over the future of America's unipolarity. The impact and effectiveness of unipolarity on the international system is a crucial quest in the study of international relations. For the United States, it is also a vital question that shapes her relationship with the world. As many historians have pointed out, the unipolarity that the United States has enjoyed has left policy-makers in Washington with uncertainty in crafting a new strategy.¹¹ From a theoretical framework, the utility of international primacy¹² and the durability of that primacy¹³ have been one of the major debates in international relations. This has also translated into discussions over the degree to

¹⁰ Dueck, Colin, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹¹ See for example, Brands, Hal, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-cold War World*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2008, and Chollet, Derek & Goldgeier, James, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11*, New York: Public Affairs, 2008. Other scholars have focused on missionary impulses that dictated American foreign policy in the 1990s, when the U.S. enjoyed her unipolar moment. See for example, Mandelbaum, Michael, *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, and Smith, Tony, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today*, Princeton: Princeton University, 2017.

¹² In 1993, during the earlier stage of America's unipolar moment, there was an intriguing debate on the topic of international security. See, Jervis, Robert (1993), 'International Primacy: Is the Game Worth the Candle,' *International Security*, 17:4, 52-67, and Huntington, Samuel (1993), 'Why International Primacy Matters,' *International Security*, 17:4, 68-85.

¹³ Michael Mastanduno, for example, discussed ways to preserve America's unipolar moment. Mastanduno, Michael (1997), 'Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War,' *International Security*, 21:4, 49-88.

which the U.S. engages with the world, namely deep engagement¹⁴ or offshore balancing,¹⁵ depending on the advocates' position in the effectiveness of American primacy.

The most recent debate between deep engagement and off-shore balancing proponents has started to shed light on the factors that existing literature on American grand strategy have not paid sufficient attention to, such as geopolitical circumstances and qualitative differences in the types of threat. In *Foreign Affairs*, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt underscored the values of offshore balancing while simultaneously conceding that certain regions, such as the Asia-Pacific, is an exception where offshore balancing is not necessarily effective and that “the United States may indeed be an indispensable nation.”¹⁶ This statement suggests that it is difficult to monolithically apply these theories to America's engagement throughout the world.

This paper therefore examines two large assumptions so as to identify issues and factors that deserve more attention in order to enhance our understanding of American grand strategy. First of all, I illustrate how the debates on America's relative decline are nothing new. The emergence of such a debate is deeply associated with the types of warfare that the United States has engaged in, as well as their outcomes. This sense of relative decline has strongly shaped America's military strategy as it sought to avoid relative decline, which eventually resulted in strengthening American primacy. Furthermore, I highlight the qualitative differences in the types of threats

¹⁴ Those who strongly oppose retrenchment include both advocates of a preponderance strategy and liberal internationalists represented by John Ikenberry. For literature by advocates of the former, see for example, Brands, Hal (2016), ‘Fools Rush out?: The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing,’ *The Washington Quarterly*, 38:2, 7-28, and Kagan, Robert, “Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire: What our tired country still owes the world,” *New Republic*. May 27, 2014. For the latter, see for example, Ikenberry, John. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011; Ikenberry John, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition: Essays on American Power and World Politics*, New York: Polity, 2006; Brooks, Stephen & Wohlforth, William, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016; and also Brooks, Stephen, Ikenberry, John & Wohlforth, William (2012/13), “Don’t Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security*, 37:3, 7-51.

¹⁵ See for example, Posen, Barry, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015; Mearsheimer, John & Walt, Stephen (2016), ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 95:4, 70-83; and Layne, Christopher, ‘Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,’ *International Security*, 22:1, 86-124.

¹⁶ Mearsheimer, John & Walt, Stephen (2016), ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 95:4, 70-83.

faced by the United States as it relates to America's national security strategy. The rise and fall of debates over America's relative decline is closely associated with the types of threats that the United States has confronted in the past, as well as Washington's response to such threats. In conclusion, I will highlight the factors that deserve closer examination for future studies so as to enhance our understanding of American grand strategy.

The Cyclical Debate over America's Relative Decline

America's relative decline may sound like a new phenomenon associated with the rise of China and the exhaustion of American power through prolonged wars in the broader Middle East since the 2000s. However, the debates over the future of American power and the nation's relative decline are nothing new. One of the most famous classic books on this topic was written in 1987 by Yale historian Paul Kennedy¹⁷, and was based on an idea triggered by the rise of Japan and Germany as major economic powers. As a matter of fact, the first time this sense of relative decline emerged in the United States was in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The Nixon Doctrine and Detente was meant to reduce America's commitment overseas amid war weariness in the U.S. and eroding support over expanded engagements abroad.

America's sense of relative decline repeatedly emerged as the United States perceived its vulnerability to irregular threats such as guerrilla warfare. This sense of decline had a significant influence on the United States' military strategy and strategic thinking. As a matter of fact, the evolution of U.S. military strategy and strategic thinking closely overlaps with the development of America's relative decline discourse. Until the Counterinsurgency doctrine was revived in the 2000s to fight insurgents in Iraq, waging irregular warfare had been absent from U.S. strategic thinking since the War in Vietnam. The response to the enormous exhaustion of national power as a result of years of anti-guerrilla warfare in Indochina was a refocus on conventional warfare that had been absent since the 1970s. This concentration on conventional warfare triggered the emergence of Net Assessment, which numerically assessed military power and competitive

¹⁷ Kennedy, Paul, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York: Random House, 1987.

strategy against the Soviet Union during the final phases of the Cold War. As the United States focused on preserving its military edge against the Soviets, technological developments encouraged the advent of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), which focuses on air power, precision airstrikes, and advanced technology in military affairs. It is the RMA that militarily supported American primacy in the post-Cold War era.

In other words, while the War in Vietnam and the discouraging experience with irregular warfare fueled America's sense of decline, the courses of action taken to avoid that decline assisted the United States in consolidating her unipolarity. America's unparalleled military power and technology allowed Washington to militarily intervene quickly and relatively inexpensively. This cycle resonates with the argument that some diplomatic historians have recently made over the origin of American unipolarity after the end of the Cold War.¹⁸ The policy decisions and events that occurred in the 1970s paved the way for America's unipolar moment.

This trajectory from a sense of relative decline to unipolarity suggests that the sense of relative decline prompted Washington to take measures to avert it, eventually assisting the U.S. in regaining its primacy. The Obama administration's policies, to an extent, run parallel to this hypothesis. The administration demonstrated numerous responses to the sense of decline that was triggered by prolonged wars in the broader Middle East that were started under the Bush administration. The Obama administration has sought cost-efficient and clandestine ways to fight terrorism. As a result, the role of the CIA, which could operate with few legal hurdles, dramatically expanded in drone strikes and counterterrorism operations, the number of which exceeded even that of its predecessor. This trend accelerated under the Obama administration based on their aversion to military intervention and boots on the ground.¹⁹ Some former officials

¹⁸ See for example, Sargent, Daniel, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s*. Oxford University Press, 2014, and Brands, Hal, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*. Cornell University Press, 2016.

¹⁹ Sanger, David, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*, New York: Broadway Books, 2012.

associated with the Obama administration have argued that their strategy and long-term goal was aimed at preserving American power, describing this strategy as the “Long Game.”²⁰

As highlighted by the cyclical debate over the relative decline of the United States, America’s experience with irregular warfare that exhausts enormous national power is the trigger of such debates. The sense of relative decline has produced policies that avoid it rather than putting the United States back on the path to her unipolar moment. In that regard, it is also reasonable to say that the choices made by the United States are crucial in preserving American primacy and avoiding her relative decline. The Cold War made it easy to gain public consensus and support for America’s foreign commitments. The major concern this time is that the United States has suffered from the erosion of domestic public support over its foreign commitments. If America’s choices are crucial, this time, it may be difficult to be too optimistic.

The Qualitative Differences in Threats and American Grand Strategy

The major dilemma of American power and unipolarity is that its effects are significantly different according to the qualitative differences of its threats. American power after the end of the Second World War was quite effective in preventing the eruption of major power wars. However, as the Cold War experience in Indochina and more recent experience in the broader Middle East reveals, the vulnerability of American power manifests itself when confronted by unconventional or irregular threats such as those posed by non-state actors.²¹

This dilemma is reflective of the two major camps that are present when discussing American national security today. One camp stems from the stream of Net Assessment and the RMA, underscoring the importance of the United States preserving her military edge against competitors and potential adversaries. In particular, China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy

²⁰ Chollet, Derek, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World*, New York: Public Affairs, 2016.

²¹ Tierbey, Dominic. *The Right Way to Lose a War: America in an Age of Unwinnable Conflicts*. New York: Little, Brown and Company 2015, 22, 29.

(PLAN) has been seeking to develop anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies against the U.S. navy.²² Beijing's rapid military modernization has therefore been a huge concern for the United States.²³ China's military modernization could potentially erode America's command of the commons in the Indo-Pacific region as well as America's military technological advantages.²⁴ Therefore, the importance of preserving America's edge against potential competitors through competitive strategies has often been underscored, and has culminated into policy debates over the Third Offset Strategy.²⁵ This line of thinking aligns with the competitive strategy that sought to preserve America's military edge against the Soviets in the 1980s,²⁶ and that also laid the foundations for America's military primacy after the end of the Cold War, when RMA reached its pinnacle.

This pursuit of maintaining America's military competitiveness is closely associated with the concept of deep engagement. As a matter of fact, RMA is what prompted some policy-makers in

²² Mahnken, Thomas (2011), 'China's Anti-Access Strategy in Historical and Theoretical Perspectives,' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 34:3, 299-323. On the other hand, in Biddle, Stephen & Oelrich, Ivan (2016), 'Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, US AirSea Battle, and in 'Command of the Commons in East Asia,' *International Security*, 41:1, 7-48, the authors offer a more sober view. They state that the A2/AD "threat's magnitude is smaller than often assumed" and that "it will be very difficult for China to extend A2/AD's effects over distances great enough to threaten most US allies if China's opponents take reasonable precautions."

²³ US Department of Defense, "Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense" (Washington, DC.: US Department of Defense, January 2012). In this document, it is underscored that "the U.S. military will invest as required to ensure its ability to operate effectively in anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) environments."

²⁴ This concern has been highlighted by US government reports on China's military, including the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China (Washington, DC.: US Department of Defense, 2006). For academic research on the diffusion of military power, see Horowitz, Michael, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

²⁵ Martinage, Robert, (2014) "Toward A New Offset Strategy: Exploiting US Long-Term Advantages to Restore US Global Power Projection Capability," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) & Brimley, Shawn; "While we can: Arresting the Erosion of America's Military Edge," Center for a New American Security (CNAS), December 2015.

²⁶ Mahnken, Thomas (ed), *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

Washington to actively intervene militarily in different corners of the world. With overwhelming airpower and precision airstrikes, warfare appeared to be cheaper and easier in the 21st century. In hindsight, the excessive reliance on military might, particularly the assumed utility of RMA, has not necessarily produced positive gains for the United States, as its experience in the 2000s testifies.²⁷ Nevertheless, America's edge is, without a doubt, vital. Advocates for less engagement and a restraint strategy also underscore the importance of America's unparalleled advantages with respect to primacy. Chief among them is the "Command of the Commons,"²⁸ a phrase coined by MIT Professor Barry Posen. The United States' capability to ensure access to global public goods such as the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) does not only raise support towards U.S. hegemony but it is also an enormous asset for the United States in projecting her power. In international relations theory, military capacity has been seen as a unitary entity,²⁹ which has hindered us from forming more accurate views about military power in the international system. Preserving America's military edge is both possible and necessary. However, a more nuanced approach is perhaps necessary so as to take advantage of this superiority for positive gains.

The other camp highlights the importance of counterinsurgency within the context of the War against Terrorism. Many of the U.S. military officials who took part in the revival of the counterinsurgency doctrine in the 2000s were more or less influenced by the War in Vietnam and

²⁷ The following article argues that "An excessive reliance on military might, to the exclusion of other dimensions of power, will yield negative returns." Drezner, Daniel (2013), 'Military Primacy doesn't Pay (Nearly as much as you think),' *International Security*, 38: 1, 52-79.

²⁸ Posen, Barry (2003), 'Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of US Hegemony,' *International Security*, 28:1, 5-46.

²⁹ Biddle, Stephen, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

by counterinsurgency operations that were conducted in Indochina.³⁰ These officers sought to redress the United States' strategic mistakes in the initial phases of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, associating it with the war in Indochina. For the so-called soldier scholars who were involved in the Surge in Iraq, the initial mistakes and confusions in Operation Iraqi Freedom were based on the assumption that, equipped with highly advanced weaponry as a result of the RMA, a low-cost and swift operation is possible with a minimum number of troops on the ground. This assumption was made by some civilian policy-makers in the Department of Defense (DoD), and it urged the U.S. military to fight the wars in the broader Middle East as if it were fighting a conventional foe based on Clausewitz-inspired strategies. In other words, the United States was initially quite successful in attacking the Center of Gravity by easily taking over Kabul and Baghdad.

However, as some military officers and policy-makers accurately predicted before the war, it was a strategic mistake to fight a war involving unconventional threats, such as insurgents, solely through conventional means. This strategic failure is what urged proponents of counterinsurgency operations to take their stance. In other words, those who underscore the necessity to pay more attention to counterinsurgency operations do so based on the sense that the U.S. needs a strategy that genuinely bridges ends and means. The United States was unable to choose the most effective means in fighting the wars in the 2000s. It is true that the American experience with counterinsurgency since the Surge in Iraq demonstrates the strategic utility of this doctrine in fighting insurgents and guerrillas. However, the most important defect is that it requires long-term and large-scale commitment. In a democracy, it is an arduous task to gain public support for such an operation. Moreover, the analysis presented in this paper suggests that, in the past, these engagements with unconventional threats have militarily and financially exhausted American power significantly. Based on the lessons learnt from strategic failure in the

³⁰ See for example, Petraeus, David, 'The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam era,' Princeton University, PhD Dissertation, 1987; Nagl, John, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005; and Boot, Max, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, 2002.

American experience in the 2000s in Iraq and Afghanistan, the emphasis on counterinsurgency is persuasive and reasonable.

However, the major problem is its feasibility and sustainability as a component of America's military strategy. As already mentioned, this dilemma of counterinsurgency and exhaustion of national power prompted the Obama administration to turn to means with a smaller American footprint. The United States now relies more on assisting allies or partner countries, encouraging them to take ownership of their own counterinsurgency operations. Alliance politics in irregular warfare has recently attracted scholarly attention, with most claiming that priorities and interests rarely align in alliance relations that are focused on assisting this type of warfare.³¹ These findings further increase the difficulty of handling irregular/unconventional threats.

While I treated different types of threats as separate, namely conventional ones among states and unconventional ones such as insurgencies, the real world is not often as simple as that. It is, therefore, worth highlighting that the security challenges are not necessarily easy to categorize and that they often manifest themselves in a hybrid fashion, combining both conventional and unconventional threats. A prime example is the maritime challenge in the Indo-Asia Pacific. China's maritime expansion through Mahanian ends to gain command of the maritime domain³² is not necessarily pursued by conventional means but rather through unconventional and indirect Sun Tzu-inspired means. In the Middle East, the hybrid nature of security challenges becomes even more obvious. The challenges in the region are not solely unconventional non-state actors, as is represented by ISIL. In many cases, regional major powers support these non-state actors in

³¹ See for example, Ladwig, Walter (2016), 'Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency: U.S. Involvement in El Salvador's Civil War, 1979-92,' *International Security*, 41:1, 99-146; *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017; Byman, Daniel (2006) 'Friends like these: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism,' *International Security*, 31:2, 79-115; and Biddle, Stephen, MacDonald, Julia & Baker, Ryan (2017), 'Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance,' *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Published online).

³² Holmes, James & Yoshimura, Toshi, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan*, London: Routledge, 2009, 121; Holmes, James & Yoshimura, Toshi, *Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013.

pursuit of their interests in the regional order. Iran, for example, has used the IRGC's elite Quds Force in assisting militias and insurgents, such as Hezbollah, as they seek to expand their influence in the region. An effective Iran policy would therefore demand a two-layered strategy that deals with Iran in two dimensions: as a regional major power and an unconventional threat.

As many scholars and policy-makers underscore, military force is an integral component of statecraft. Regardless of whether the new administration is capable of implementing it, the Trump administration has emphasized their commitment to "Peace through Strength." The Obama administration's explicit hesitance towards the use of force attracted criticism as a sign of weakness, urging some scholars to emphasize the importance of the use of force.³³ Some scholars have argued that American internationalism, which has often been associated with liberalism, is most effectively promoted under conservative means through the demonstration of strength, such as during the Reagan administration. Coined as Conservative Internationalism,³⁴ Henry Nau underscores that the demonstration of strength and force is effective in the pursuit of peace as well as in supporting America's internationalist ideals. Military power is, without a doubt, a vital component of national power for the United States. However, the way force is applied is what produces different outcomes, which can sometimes be disastrous. The dilemma between conventional and unconventional threats implies that it would be beneficial for future discussions on grand strategy to include more on the qualitative differences of the types of threats. Furthermore, the cases of China and Iran suggest that current security challenges are more hybrid, demanding a more nuanced strategy.

Conclusion

The debate over American grand strategy and speculations over America's relative decline has attracted enormous scholarly and policy-oriented interest. The implications of unipolarity on international relations theory as well as the significant policy relevance of this topic, have

³³See for example, Cohen, Eliot, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force*, New York: Basic Books, 2017.

³⁴ Nau, Henry, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan*, Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2013.

increased academic interest in the degree of America's engagement with the world. This has produced academic debates between advocates of deep engagement and offshore balancing. With military forces closely associated with deep engagement, the question over military power has also evolved around such a dichotomy. However, history tells us that America's relative decline is not a definite fact but rather a choice. The discouraging experience in the broader Middle East in the 2000s, which has been a trigger for the sense of relative decline, stems from failed strategy rather than diminishing American power. "Strategy fails when the chosen means prove insufficient to the ends,"³⁵ as the American experience in the broader Middle East underscores. If so, "the solution is better strategy, not retrenchment,"³⁶ as Michael Beckley claims. Along with the analysis provided in this working paper, these statements underscore the importance of understanding qualitatively different threats and the effectiveness of military power. The cyclical debates over America's relative decline highlights the fact that failed strategy with an incongruity in the means adopted and the actual threats confronted produced discouraging results that exhausted national power. These factors have all triggered debates over America's relative decline, which encourages discussions over the degree of engagement.

These observations led to this paper's argument that discussions on grand strategy may be more effective if it focused on the factors that shape America's engagement with the world as well as her strategy. As we have seen in this paper, this includes the qualitative differences in types of threats as well as geographical differences. Especially in the contemporary world, the differences in threats are also associated with geographical differences. America's deep engagement has been effective in the maritime domain, including the management of alliance politics, which appears to be a result of consensus between advocates of offshore balancing and deep engagement. The importance of America's superiority as a maritime power with the "Command of Commons" is also a shared view among those advocating for a more active approach and those who prefer a more restrained strategy. This fact implies that a focus on

³⁵ Betts, Richard (2000), 'Is Strategy an Illusion?', *International Security*, 25:2, 5-50.

³⁶ Beckley, Michael (2011/12), 'China's Century: Why America's Edge will Endure,' *International Security*, 36:3, 41-78.

geographical differences, regardless of whether the security challenge is maritime or continental, deserves closer attention as we seek to enhance our understanding of American grand strategy. Moreover, the emerging hybrid types of threats both in the Middle East and in the Asia Pacific suggest that further investigation into such cases could also make enormous scholarly contributions and have immense policy implications. In international relations theory, the two are treated differently and the intersection between them has rarely been explored. Bridging the two will not only assist us in having a more comprehensive picture in IR theory, but would also be beneficial in choosing the right means and strategy in confronting the increasingly complex security challenges we face today.