



American primacy: what future?

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The future of US strategic primacy has been a contentious issue in recent years, both within the US and beyond. The US's pre-eminent strategic position has underpinned global and regional order since 1945—if it's slipping, a new world looms. True, the US has never been able to shape the world entirely to its wishes—even in its heyday, China went communist, the Korean War ended in a draw, and the Russians launched Sputnik. And how quickly

that 'new world' looms would depend heavily on the speed of US slippage: fast, and we'd find ourselves in revolutionary times; slow, and decades might pass with relatively little change. But primacy is the story both of American power and of the 'conversion' of that power into global influence.¹ Since leaders need followers, it's also the story of the broad acceptance of Washington's leadership role by the international community.



People react to the death of Osama bin Laden in Times Square in New York, 2 May 2011. © Picture Media/Reuters/Eric Thayer

Judgments about the condition of US primacy have become a shorthand means for rehearsing differences over two large and important topics: whether US power assets are waning, and whether the US global leadership position is faltering. This paper explores the issue of US primacy and its likely trajectory. It treats primacy as both a strategic choice by US governments (that is, as a policy option in US grand strategy) and as an empirical condition (that is, as the physical pre-eminence of US power assets in particular regions).

In regard to the first—US policy choices—the Obama administration sometimes seems caught on the horns of a dilemma: it wants the US to lead the world, but its own priorities are strongly domestic. Moreover, its natural instincts are to be more consultative and less domineering in the international space. Still, being more consultative isn't the same thing as forsaking primacy—indeed, the US global order since 1945 has been 'tied together by partnerships, pacts, institutions and grand bargains'.² And the real problem with primacy as a policy choice might be broader than the character of the current administration. Domestic political divisions may be eroding the long-held American consensus about the future direction of strategic and foreign policy.

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In regard to the second—empirical power relationships—US physical pre-eminence is becoming harder to sustain as other powers grow. Primacy is the natural handmaiden of a condition of global unipolarity, but in a bipolar world it's more shared (as it was during the

Cold War, when the US was the leader of the 'Free World' and the Soviet Union was the leader of its own bloc). And it's debatable whether primacy is anything more than a 'first among equals' condition in a multipolar world. However, global unipolarity is weakening, and some regional orders already look more multipolar.

Moreover, what's unusual about the emerging multipolar order is the substantial role that non-Western states will play in it. Historian Ian Morris argues that Western global dominance, of which US primacy is but one subspecies, has rested upon deep historical advantages, principally the advantage of having its Industrial Revolution first:

It is hard to think of anything happening after 1350 that would have led to the East industrialising before the West or have prevented industrialisation altogether. To find a past that could plausibly have led to Eastern rule by 2000, we have to go back a full nine centuries to 1100.³

But even Morris accepts that Western advantages are running out, and the prospects for future Eastern global dominance are rising.

Primacy as a strategic choice: the ideational variable

Let's start with the notion of primacy as a policy choice. For America, primacy begins at home. Superpowers construct their grand strategies the same way everyone else does: by political decision. America decides what strategic role it wants to play in the wider world and sets its foreign and defence policies accordingly. During the Cold War that was relatively easy—the US saw itself as the vanguard of Western democracy, so an American aspiration for global leadership was an end in itself. Because of the imperative that global leadership contests mustn't result in nuclear Armageddon, that aspiration had limits. Mainstream US strategic thinkers

worked on George Kennan's thesis: if the Soviet Union's adventurism could be contained, it would collapse from internal pressures rather than external ones. But that hope faded over the decades, so the end of the Cold War, after the USSR's collapse, took Washington almost completely by surprise.

At the end of the Cold War, strategic analysts foresaw four possibilities for American grand strategy: primacy, selective engagement, liberal internationalism or isolationism. Since 1990, the commitment to primacy has become more blurred in US strategic thinking. For one thing, Americans have been increasingly likely to ask, 'What do you do with primacy?' And US leaders and officials have typically couched their strategic goals in softer terms, such as 'liberal internationalism'.

There is, in American culture, a deep desire not to appear heavy-handed—not to look imperial. That's why some have talked of the US as 'reluctant crusaders'.⁴ But the Wilsonian ethic in US foreign policy—the desire to do good in the world—is a compelling one, and an international distribution of power essentially unipolar in its key metrics constituted an invitation for Washington to draw its strategic ambitions generously. The competing pressures of culture, ethics and power distribution made for a set of awkward—some might say schizophrenic—compromises in US grand strategy. One assessment of President Clinton's grand strategy, for example, judged it to be 'an uneasy amalgam of selective engagement, cooperative security and primacy'.⁵ Critics might well judge that current American grand strategy isn't so different today.

The debate about primacy has ebbed and flowed across the post-Cold War years. While those focused on short-term events tend to see the debate as a relatively recent phenomenon—the product, in particular, of the rise of China and the global financial

crisis (GFC)—it boasts a longer lineage. Two eminent international relations scholars, Samuel Huntington and Robert Jervis, argued the opposite sides of the issue in the prestigious *International Security* journal in the early 1990s, reaching different conclusions about the merits of enduring US primacy. Jervis contended that primacy was largely unnecessary in a world of 'low security threats and great common interests'. Huntington argued the opposite: that primacy allowed the US to ensure its security, promote its interests, and shape the international environment in a world that might well return to unfettered competition and disparity.⁶

The choices sketched out by Huntington and Jervis are still those that confront US policymakers today. Indeed, the choices have become starker. Huntington and Jervis were able to conduct their debate as a largely academic exercise within the perceived strategic safe haven of US unipolarity. The events of September 2001 confounded those perceptions. 9/11 drew forth an angry America, a hyperpower committed to an open-ended War on Terror. A grand strategy of US primacy reappeared in a unilateralist guise, insisting that the world choose sides—either to support America or to oppose it. Washington's 'tone' underwent a sharp change, not just from the 1990s but even from the earlier Cold War years.

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In January 2009, President Barack Obama inherited a difficult political legacy. Repairing the reputational damage to the US brand required a sensitive touch. Obama and

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have sought to defend US leadership, but mainly as a quest to build new patterns of strategic collaboration, or what we might think of as ‘primacy as a team exercise’. Daniel Drezner, a political commentator for *Foreign Policy*, explains Obama’s strategic policy succinctly: ‘Essentially, the administration will try to argue that multilateralism serves as a force multiplier, allowing America to extend its reach while burden-sharing with supporters who benefit from an American-led international order.’⁷ There’s nothing wrong with that goal—the art lies in achieving it in a world where the GFC might have made it harder to share the burden.

When Obama came to office he sought more open engagement with both partners and rivals, insisting that the US should lead but arguing that it couldn’t overcome global challenges alone:

I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism ... And so I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognising that that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create partnerships because ... we can’t solve these problems alone.⁸

Obama argues that power isn’t a ‘zero-sum game’:

We look to rising powers with the view that in the 21st century, the national security and economic growth of one country need not come at the expense of another. I know there are many who question how the United States perceives China’s emergence. But as I have said, in an interconnected world, power does not need to be a zero-sum game, and nations need not fear the success of another ... [T]he United States

does not seek to contain China, nor does a deeper relationship with China mean a weakening of our bilateral alliances. On the contrary, the rise of a strong, prosperous China can be a source of strength for the community of nations.⁹

Essentially, Obama’s arguments are those of Robert Jervis from 1993: that in a world of low security threats and great common interests, cooperation should be the principal vehicle of international relations.

Intermittent statements from within the administration might suggest a more fluid set of judgments on those issues. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell referred to the ‘hegemonic parable’ in a speech in late 2009. He observed that established states often find it difficult to deal with rising states, and that even the most optimistic historical example (the transition from British to American primacy) was deeply challenging. In negotiating the ‘hegemonic parable’ underway between the US and China, ‘even in the easiest circumstances, this is a very difficult proposition and one that will take years, patience. There will be setbacks.’¹⁰

However, it seems that the administration wasn’t keen to argue this line. Mention of the ‘hegemonic parable’ was notably absent from Campbell’s later speeches:

Animating the calculation that the emergence of new powers necessitates conflict is an assumption that the U.S. is a nation in decline, soon to be eclipsed by new and rising powers. Nothing could be further from the truth.¹¹

Between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, the message is generally the same. Clinton echoes Obama when she argues that the relationship between the US and China is not ‘a zero sum 19th century interaction, but uncharted territory’.¹² The administration’s

exploration of that uncharted territory has been made no easier by a string of recent events, including the GFC. The crisis was a big blow to the US economy but an even bigger one to US confidence. In 2008–09, it was easy to find some shockingly brutal commentary by American analysts about the country's future:

America in 2009 is economically palsied, diplomatically isolated and militarily exhausted. Rather than a triumphant stroll along the flagstone-paved pathway to a new American Century, the country's current course looks more and more like a grim and unforgiving trudge down the steep and rocky slope of decline.¹³

Even today, a wide range of views about the future American role in the world coexist in the US. Some say that US decline has been oversold, and that the country has considerable power reserves yet. Others say primacy is becoming more 'contested'. Paul Kennedy says it's wrong to think about the reshaping of global order as American 'decline', because the world is simply reverting to its normal configuration.¹⁴ Anne-Marie Slaughter writes of the need for the US to think about primacy in a new way in a world that's moved on from the 20th century: 'we want to become the strongest competitor and most influential player in a deeply-interconnected global system, which requires that we invest less in defense and more in sustainable prosperity and the tools of effective engagement.'¹⁵ Joseph Nye, in his latest work, *The future of power*, argues that the US is still well placed in the new indices of power, such as information networking, and needs to use smart, rather than sheer, power to make its influence felt in the world.

Many acknowledge that US power is in *relative* decline, but then argue about what that means. Some say the US can still do 'surge primacy'; others say that frugality

means the US won't be surging very often. Some urge a new policy of strategic restraint. Others want a more humanitarian cast to US policy—with the Libyan intervention model providing a policy that could be arranged to provide support for other protesters in the Arab Spring. Indeed, the US strategic mainstream is worryingly fractured about the future direction and intensity of US strategic engagement. This is a point that Evelyn Goh has made: the US needs to reassure itself about its future capabilities and role, as well as reassuring others.

The rise of the Tea Party and the erosion of bipartisanship about the US's strategic objectives and its relative strength point to a more contested strategic policy in America in coming years.

This debate isn't just one between academics—the shape of domestic politics in the US lies at its heart. The rise of the Tea Party and the erosion of bipartisanship about the US's strategic objectives and its relative strength point to a more contested strategic policy in America in coming years. The Tea Party is oddly divided between Jeffersonian isolationists and Jacksonian populists; in the wake of Osama bin Laden's death, members of Congress are more willing to withhold commitment and resources from ambivalent partners, like Pakistan; and the relentless pressure from the bleak fiscal outlook is felt almost everywhere in American politics these days.

Eric Edelman, a former US defence official, has neatly encapsulated what he terms the 'broken consensus' within America. On one side, he says, the 'declinists' include the economic determinists who see the US global position slipping as economic power spreads,

the structural realists who think multipolarity is the ‘normal’ condition of international relations, and the over-expansionists (of both left and right) who see an ‘imperial’ America as the unattractive international relations variant of monopoly capitalism. On the other side, the anti-decliners include economic revivalists who believe in the redemptive capacity of America’s economy, soft-power advocates who insist that the US is still ‘attractive’ to others, structural positionalists who think America’s geopolitical location and its alliance relationships remain keys to US influence, and benign hegemonists who believe the US practises a unique form of global leadership that others want to support.¹⁶ Edelman’s characterisation of the two sides shows the debate’s complexity and underlines the fact that it stretches well beyond the administration and into the broader American community.

Primacy as reality: the material variable

Primacy isn’t just a policy choice. It has to reflect power realities on the ground and the capacity of the primary power to convert its material resources into strategic outcomes. Even if the US spirit were willing, some might judge that the flesh is weak. The weakness derives from two different conditions: US power at home, and relative US power abroad.

Economic power is usually seen as the most fundamental and fungible form of power. In consequence, the foundations of US primacy were battered by the economic crisis that began in 2008. Certainly, the US has many advantages—including ‘its attractive social and political model, abundance of natural resources, flexible and adaptable market economy, openness to innovation, demographic comparative advantages and historically demonstrated resilience in recovering from economic reverses’¹⁷—



Job seeker inquires about job openings at Vons stand at the 10th annual Skid Row Career Fair held at the Los Angeles Mission 2 June 2011. The unemployment rate rose to 9.1 percent. © AP via AAP/Damian Dovarganes

but worries over the US's economic problems haven't dissipated.

The government's ability to tackle the nation's financial problems is a real test for US leadership. The US is the world's biggest debtor country. Moreover, its debt as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) is edging upwards. The administration is seeking congressional authority to raise the federal debt ceiling—currently set at US\$14.294 trillion. Even for a country with a GDP in 2010 estimated at US\$14.72 trillion, that debt level is significant. Elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan's external debt is the sixth highest in the world, whereas China ranks twenty-second and India twenty-eighth. There's broad bipartisan consensus within the US on the need to rein in the federal deficit, but no agreed programs for doing so—debt and its management have become issues of political partisanship. Debt servicing costs are expected to quadruple within the decade, making interest payments larger than the current defence budget, but the process of negotiating real cuts to the US federal budget has spawned an 'ideological and political battle' between Democrats and Republicans across the country.¹⁸

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Some say the US political system isn't designed to handle the sort of rapid changes required to stem the current economic damage. The *Economist* hosted a debate in November 2010 on whether or not 'America's political system is broken', and 77% of respondents voted 'yes'.¹⁹ President Obama, despite winning 53% of the popular vote, has been unable to achieve several of his key initiatives.²⁰ The government isn't paralysed,

but endless deadlocks in Congress—even when the President's party did have the majority—have raised doubts about the efficacy of the US political system.

Moreover, the US faces daunting bills in many areas of domestic renewal. A recent report on infrastructure, for example, noted that the US needed to find an estimated US\$2 trillion just to rebuild its deteriorating networks—'these systems include roads, water lines, sewage treatment plants and dams serving the nation's primary economic centers.'²¹ Infrastructure, along with education and innovation, is one of Obama's priorities. Its renewal is a key part of his agenda for restoring American leadership in the world by regrowing the wellsprings of its power at home.

History demonstrates that economic crashes can shake leadership claims. In the 1930s, when the US was recovering from the 1929 stock market crash, US foreign policy turned inward because the American public was reluctant to assume a global leadership role. Today the US public is increasingly concerned that its influence is waning in the Asia-Pacific region as a result of China's strong economic growth and subsequent military expansion. A Pew poll taken in February 2008 found that 41% of Americans thought the US was the top economic power; in January 2011, 47% said that China was.²² True, declinist fears in the US mainstream are cyclical²³, but some commentators are insisting that decline is real this time—that even the boy who cried wolf did eventually meet a real wolf.²⁴

Military power

Another factor that's key to US primacy is American military might. The US is undeniably the world's pre-eminent military power: it has the world's strongest power projection capabilities, a robust nuclear arsenal and a set of alliances and partnerships that

allow it to deploy forces virtually anywhere on the face of the globe. In FY2009–10, military expenditure accounted for 4.7% of the US's massive GDP, situating it far ahead of any other country. But Washington's carrying the security burden in a number of theatres, including Europe, the Middle East, Afghanistan–Pakistan, East Asia and its own hemisphere. Iraq remains an impost, and the much-publicised war in Afghanistan is now entering its tenth year.

As the US economy continues to struggle, competing pressures on the US military budget will grow. The administration has already announced two cuts in defence spending this year. In January, it cut the defence budget by US\$78 billion over the next five years, and in April, Obama ordered an additional US\$400 billion cut in 'security spending' to be achieved over the next twelve years. The Pentagon is currently engaged in a review over how those cuts might best be achieved across the force. Secretary Gates has stressed that no programs are off the table—that the US might need to revisit its standard

of being able to fight two regional wars simultaneously, or might consider moving from a nuclear triad (of intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched missiles and bomber aircraft) to a nuclear dyad (forsaking either the land-based or bomber leg).²⁵ But he's opposed a 'hollowing out' of the force and stressed the continuing relevance that hard power will have in the years ahead.

Of course, the newly appointed Leon Panetta, who will take over as Defense Secretary in July, will bring to the job his own positions on those issues. He possesses a fine sense of security judgment from his time as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, but he was also the director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Clinton administration, and it seems likely that his budgetary skills will be at least as important as his strategic ones in the coming years. With a number of commentators pointing to a more frugal US role in the world, Panetta will be critically involved in matching resources to missions in the lean years ahead.



The aircraft carrier *USS Ronald Reagan* travels through the Pacific Ocean with other ships assigned to the Rim of the Pacific 2010 exercise
24 July 2010. © US Navy

That task won't be easy. Official military strategic planning documents continue to advocate an immense global role for the US military.²⁶ That's because US national interests are spread far and wide around the globe, and not concentrated conveniently within US borders. Moreover, international obligations, once assumed, aren't easily given up. The US is a security provider—it's obliged to maintain a credible military presence and military relationships with regional allies—so its allies and partners will generally be supportive of Washington during America's times of troubles; many will look to do more themselves to ensure that their alliances continue to flourish.

The US's military resources aren't entirely material: they also include the willingness of the citizenry to commit the military abroad. The American public has so far proven astonishingly resilient to the costs and casualties of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. True, its enthusiasm for new ventures is probably diminished by some level of 'war fatigue', which only a new, direct and immediate threat to US interests—like another 9/11—might offset. But, so far at least, war fatigue seems to press less than direct material considerations on US defence commitments.

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Conditions abroad—shifting power relativities

If US primacy is being unsettled by discord and economic pressures at home, it's also being undermined by shifting realities abroad. At least two important shifts are occurring. First, other powers are simply getting stronger—part of what Fareed

Zakaria would call 'the rise of the rest', and what Paul Kennedy would regard as a return to normalcy. Second, more players are gaining greater access to the global commons (the high seas, space and cyberspace), and it's the ability to play in the global commons that helps define the world-shapers as distinct from the rest. As a study by the Center for a New American Security observed, 'the decentralization of military power and expanded access to technologies once reserved for superpowers will necessarily contest America's 60-year-old dominance over the global commons and its ability to maintain their openness.'²⁷

The shifting power variables increasingly manifest in particular patterns of behaviour. As two analysts, Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel, have recently argued, the slippage in US power is being felt most at 'the frontier' of American global power—the peripheries of East Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe:

Viewed separately, these are unrelated regional silos, each with its own geopolitical rhythm, security logic and ranking in the hierarchy of American strategic and political priorities. But seen together, a different picture emerges. In all three regions, small, geopolitically exposed states with formal or informal U.S. security commitments straddle age-old strategic fault lines in close proximity to rising or resurgent power centers ... America's global rivals are doing what aspirant powers have done at moments of transition for millennia ... They are probing the top state on the outer limits of its power commitments, where its strategic appendages are most vulnerable and its strength is most thinly spread.²⁸

This picture of current geopolitics is a disturbing one, for it raises simultaneously the durability of a geopolitical order in which the US remains committed to the defence of

the Eurasian ‘rimlands’ against consequential rivals based upon the continent, and suggests a strategy by which those rivals can test US resolve cheaply:

Though hard evidence of the actual thinking of Chinese, Iranian or Russian decision-makers is understandably scarce, it seems likely that these powers do act on the assumption that, over time, U.S. responses to probing will grow less robust either because of distractions (like wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), introspection (for example, a presidential preference for the domestic over the foreign agenda), fiscal constraints (financial crisis, deficits, shrinking defense budgets), or vague premonitions of a ‘post-American’ century.²⁹

The challenges in the global commons arena have come much more onto the American radar in recent years. Ever since Barry Posen’s 2003 work³⁰ proposed that domination of the commons lay at the heart of the US’s international position, both policymakers in Washington and US analysts and commentators have become more sensitive to the growing intrusion of new players into those spaces. In essence, Posen was arguing not for a grand strategy of primacy that turned upon unilateralism, nationalism and the US’s advantages in physical power, but for a ‘more sustainable’ strategy of selective engagement based upon its ‘command of the commons’—of the sea, the air, and space. Many have since added cyberspace as another arena of the global commons, but the logic of Posen’s position isn’t altered by that addition.

Ironically, though, analysts have increasingly come to see challenges to the US command of the commons as challenges to US primacy—something that Posen concluded was already untenable. What’s clear, however, is that decreasing entry costs to the global commons are empowering a greater variety of strategic

players in a realm that the US once considered its own. As more players enter that space, perceptions of US global dominance can only become more blurred.

Impact on the Asia–Pacific region

As Americans argue over whether primacy is good or achievable, and as power realities shift both within and beyond America’s borders, it’s entirely likely that US primacy in the Asia–Pacific region won’t escape unscathed. US primacy in this region has always been more variable than some might like to suggest. Because of World War II and the Cold War, the US has had a strong focus on Northeast Asia as the subregion of greatest interest to its own agenda, so US primacy has been felt relatively strongly there. By contrast, it’s been felt rather less strongly in Southeast Asia, and it’s arguable whether US primacy in South Asia has ever been a defining condition.

Alongside that geographical variability, US primacy has also waxed and waned over time. In the late 1970s, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War for example, US primacy in Asia seemed somewhat thinner than before. Even the two recent years of 2009 and 2010 offer another contrast. In 2009, the US was sideswiped by the GFC, engaged in a tussle with the new Democratic Party of Japan government on the future of the US Marines’ Futenma base, struggling to explain extended nuclear deterrence to its Asian partners after Obama’s Prague speech on the virtues of nuclear disarmament, and possessed of few good options to respond to North Korea’s second nuclear test. In 2010, the US was overtly back in Asia as South Korea’s ally after the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, as ASEAN’s partner in response to China’s declaration of the South China Sea as a ‘core interest’, and as India’s

supporter for an accelerating developmental trajectory. In brief, US primacy isn't always felt in equal measure across the different subregions of Asia, or across different periods.

Moreover, the US's sheer determination not to let primacy slip through its fingers will be an important motivating factor. Secretary Clinton has already made clear that the US isn't about to cede the Pacific to anyone, and some analysts are speculating that US engagement in Asia is actually headed upwards, not downwards, as the US reprioritises the region in relation to its other commitments. Ernest Bower, an analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, recently concluded that with 'Osama down, Obama will pivot' from 'the quagmire of a war on terrorism dominated by a focus on the Middle East to a new paradigm for security and growth in Asia'.³¹ If it's true that Asia really is becoming a key centrepiece for US engagement, that would be important news for America's allies and partners here. And it's not beyond question—in a time of belt-tightening, great powers are usually obliged to prioritise their interests to a greater extent than they do when resources are plentiful. Some might well read both the Osama killing and Obama's new plans for peace in the Middle East very much in the way that Bower suggests.

Still, even a considerably greater US focus on Asia wouldn't automatically solve the problem. The US's role in the Asia–Pacific will be moulded in part by its domestic conditions and in part by shifts in the region's relative power. Slippage in US primacy isn't just arithmetic. China, India and Japan face their own power-conversion challenges. The raw numbers of growing regional power might be misleading as an indicator of shifting patterns of influence. Each of the large regional powers sorely lacks a narrative of how its own power benefits the region. In particular, China's failure to unpack such a narrative

both constrains Chinese influence and makes regional countries worry about the future shape of regional order.

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Whatever reconfiguration of power emerges, it won't be a simple, linear transition of primacy from the US to the second in line. Great powers act to preserve influence—they don't stand idly by while it frays. Even in its financially straitened years, the US will be trying to play a good hand in Asia. That hand will involve both direct attempts to bolster its position in Asia—including through the global force posture review—and indirect attempts to ensure that its competitors must operate in an increasingly interwoven network of economic and political institutions. The US will seek to persuade other powers, and a wider range of regional countries, that Western rules of the game are worth following. It will, in effect, seek to ensure that US interests are protected by whatever international order outlives US primacy.

Two international relations theories—power transition theory and balance of power theory—provide helpful insight into power arrangements in the Asia–Pacific region. Power transition theory proposes that the primary power's position is stable if it can maintain a large power advantage over the other great powers, and if nations further down in the hierarchy are generally 'satisfied' with the international order.³² Hierarchical change then typically occurs when the dominant power is besieged by domestic challenges. Balance of power theory is based on the realist assumption that the international system is inherently anarchical.

Change occurs when other powers seek to balance against the dominant power.³³

Most countries in the Asia–Pacific region are generally in favour of maintaining the existing regional security arrangements, and most still see the US as enjoying a substantial power advantage over other great powers, so the power transition theory still seems to fit the region well.³⁴ But to retain that position of dominance, the US mustn't only look strong at home—it must be able to retail future expectations of that strength abroad. As Niall Ferguson writes, '... in the realm of political entities, the role of perception is just as crucial, if not more so. In imperial crises, it is not the material underpinnings of power that really matter but expectations about future power.'³⁵ Secretary Gates attempted to nurture those expectations at the recent Shangri-La Dialogue.

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By contrast, counterbalancing to offset US influence seems a distinctly rare phenomenon. One of the regional great powers, Japan, is a US ally, and another, India, seems to be deliberately pursuing warmer relations with Washington. China's more ambivalent, but even it isn't a dedicated balancer. It balances the US on some things but not on others.

If power transition theory offers us our best 'explanation' for the current security environment, the key issue will not be balancing behaviour by others but the rate of loss of US dominance. In international relations, superpowers don't rise and fall every day, so the initial inclination would be to see only slow change in the US position of dominance. That's a good first conclusion, but it ought to be qualified by a second:

the rate of change between great powers is typically slow because most of the time they're all growing, albeit at varying rates. The sharpest changes in international relations occur when some powers are either stalled or experiencing absolute decline. The Asia–Pacific strategic environment is no stranger to this phenomenon: the two 'regional' great powers of the Cold War days, the Soviet Union and Japan, both fell on hard times while others were growing rapidly. The question that the GFC brought to the fore in Asia was whether a similar fate awaited the US. Superpowers are better placed than regional powers to weather hard times, but the question hasn't gone away.

What it means for Australia

Australia has a core strategic interest in the durability of the liberal international order that the US built after World War II. Our own alliance with the United States, ANZUS, is one part—albeit a minor one—of that order. The major parts of the international order are those alliances that tie the US to the defence of its principal partners on the Eurasian rimlands and those institutions that establish and underpin a set of global liberal economic arrangements. Some might say that we have a higher interest in the continuation of the existing liberal order than we do in US primacy, but that's dangerously like trying to separate the dancer from the dance—one was built as a result of the efforts of the other. Can the liberal international order survive the waning of the power that created it? Similarly, were the major parts of that order to erode, it's unlikely that our minor part would have much meaning.

Our neighbourhood is changing. The Asia–Pacific is where US primacy might be most severely tested in the coming decades. Our alliance with the US will withstand the rise of China, but US primacy might well become 'patchier' as strategic relativities shift within the region. If so, we'll need to think ahead to plan for those years when American attention



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton walks with Prime Minister Julia Gillard, 7 November 2010. Clinton is in Melbourne along with US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates for annual Australia United States Ministerial consultations (AUSMIN). © AAP/William West

is distracted elsewhere or when regional great powers are feeling especially empowered. The re-emergence of the Asian great powers has prompted discussion in Australian strategic circles about how Australia can plan for the expected regional power shifts.

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Australian strategic policy has long been underwritten by US primacy and the six-decade-old alliance between our two countries. In a practical sense, the benefits we reap from the alliance, including shared military training and access to modern military technologies, don't depend solely on the future of US primacy, because even in a multipolar world the ANZUS alliance would still offer us access to such benefits. But if US power is weakening, then Australia will

find itself—like other US allies—in a more worrying place. As the director of Chatham House, Robin Niblett, once noted, 'its allies might wish that the United States were wiser, but they rarely have wished it to be weaker.'³⁶ In short, if we want ANZUS to remain an effective alliance, we have a direct interest in doing what we can to promote the durability of the US-shaped order.

Most analyses of Julia Gillard's foreign policy have drawn the conclusion that the Prime Minister cast her vote at the AUSMIN talks in November 2010, clearly throwing her cards in with the US and the enduring ANZUS alliance, but the speech that Gillard delivered to the US Congress on 10 March indicated that there's a finer gradation in her understanding of the region's future stability. There, she did more than reaffirm the ANZUS alliance. She encouraged America's political leaders to believe in their own greatness, to believe that a new generation of Americans would be the foundation of future strength, and to believe that the centre of global strategic and economic weight was shifting to the Asia-Pacific. She assured them that Australia

would do what it could to ‘strengthen the fabric’ of US relationships with ‘key partners’ in Asia, including Japan, South Korea, India and Indonesia, and to ‘underpin regional stability’. It’s no secret that the Australian Government is looking at new opportunities to enhance the US position and presence within the region as part of that underpinning.

It’s also true that Australia, like other regional countries, will explore other strategic options as the US position in Asia becomes relatively weaker. The options would include a more robust policy of defence self-reliance and closer partnerships with a range of Asian countries. Neither could easily replace the advantages that we gain now from an alliance with the dominant global power.

Conclusion

Some analysts think the challenge to US primacy lies primarily at the level of US policy commitment—that it’s really a problem of will rather than one of material power. Others say exactly the opposite—that US policy commitments haven’t shifted much, but that the relative decline in US material assets is the basis for a gradual slippage in Washington’s international leadership position. In truth, primacy’s slipping on both fronts. Over the next ten years, we could well see both an America less confident about its place in the world and an America that faces greater challenges in converting its material power into influence.

As a result, international relations theorists will increasingly be trying to find an adjective to put in front of the word ‘primacy’ when they talk about the US’s global and regional role. Whether the appropriate term then becomes ‘qualified primacy’, ‘patchy primacy’, ‘surge primacy’ or even ‘team primacy’ is perhaps a question beyond this paper, but the term’s less important than what it connotes. Even a qualified form of US primacy should

be seen as having both a positive and a negative cast. Primacy, in whatever form you can achieve it, is nothing to sneeze at. But for Australia, as for other US allies and partners, harder times lie ahead. The ANZUS alliance certainly isn’t going to disappear; nor is it going to crumble. It just won’t be the assured path to strategic outcomes that it was in an earlier era, when the US was effectively the only game in town.

Endnotes

- 1 This sentence draws upon the notion of ‘power conversion’ outlined by Joseph Nye in his book *The future of power* (Public Affairs, New York; see Chapter 1). Nye argues that translating power resources into effective influence is a longstanding problem for the US—but it seems no simpler for other countries.
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