

Understanding US “Re-pivot” to Asia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explains the nature and the context of the future of US foreign policy to Asia or the so-called US re-pivot policy to Asia. By using the historical method, this paper tries to make sense of the continuous US engagement in Asia, past and present; with hopes to illuminate even quite distant futures of US foreign policy direction. The 2020 US presidential candidates, Donald Trump and Joe Biden have signaled their strong intention of US re-pivot to Asia. However, the new re-pivot to Asia should be different from Obama's 'pivot to Asia'. Re-pivot should bring practical economic, strategic, and political benefits to Asian countries, rather than simply containing China.

Keywords: Post-pandemic World Order, Re-pivot Policy, US Foreign Policy, US-Indonesia Relations.

INTRODUCTION

Asia has never been absent from the US strategic arrangement, even during Trump's presidency. After his 2017 visit to Asia, President Trump passed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), which authorizes US\$1.5 billion in spending for a range of US programs in East Asia and Southeast Asia to “develop a long-term strategic vision and a comprehensive, multifaceted, and principled US policy for the Indo-Pacific region (Saha, 2020).” America's economic future lies in the Indo-Pacific region, with Southeast Asia as its center, despite Trump's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and his 'America First' policy. The ASEAN countries are already the fourth-largest export market for the US after Canada, Mexico, and China. By 2050, their collective middle class will comprise 350 million people, with approximately US\$300 billion in disposable income (Harding & Tran, 2019). This paper has the aims to explain the nature and the context of the US re-pivot policy to Asia from a historical perspective.

Moreover, continuous China's military rise has encouraged the US to maintain its force posture in the region even amid news headlines of the Middle East turmoil and defense budget cut. Since 2011, the United States began rotating 2,500 marines through bases in northern and Western Australia and stationing new littoral combat ships in nearby Singapore. In Asia itself, there are over 67,000 US troops in at least 225 bases in Japan, South Korea, including in the Philippines and Darwin Marine Base in Australia (Yee, 2011). The other presidential candidate, Joe Biden, seems to agree with continuing US engagement with Asia, particularly in containing China's influence on the region. If elected as president, Joe Biden seems to have no plan to cut the current U.S. defense budget as he will refocus the attention of US military forces to potential threats from “near-peer” powers such as China and Russia (Gould, 2020). Both presidential candidates have signaled their strong intention of US re-pivot to Asia.

Nevertheless, the problem of gaining foreign policy focus through re-pivot to Asia does not come only from the current international dynamics, moreover, it seems the historical baggage of the Cold War has not been successfully removed from the collective memory. The fact of the matter, history acts as the main obstruction for US' continuous engagement in Asia. Therefore, it is not sufficient to understand the US pivot to Asia merely from assessing the contemporary. It is important to examine the evolution of US policies toward this region since the Post-War period.

RESEARCH METHOD

The design of this study mostly follows a qualitative research methodology, specifically a historical approach. This research's primary goal is to understand the US re-pivot policy by focusing on the whole picture rather than breaking it down into variables. The purpose is to see a holistic picture and depth of understanding of the U.S. policy development toward the Asian region. Therefore, this article writes 'narrative history' to draw some general lessons on the policy's change and continuity. Moreover, examining its historical context, helps us understand the factors that shape a complex system, such as foreign policy processes. Without that, we omitted the most important dimension that is time, which can misinterpret the deeper meaning of the correlations between variables. The data used in this article are taken from secondary sources. The sources are not limited to the contemporary works and the much older writings on U.S. foreign policy. Historical pieces on foreign policy complement the recent analytical study on foreign policy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is a historical assessment of US' continuous engagement in Asia or the Indo-Pacific region. According to John Lewis Gaddis (1992), like cartographers mapping landscapes, historians represent what they can never replicate. In doing so, they combine the techniques of artists, geologists, paleontologists, and evolutionary biologists. Unlike social scientists, historians are not obsessed with finding independent variables functioning in the static system. Also, historians make forecasts all the time, but they are using analogies than scientific theories. They are not seeking 'scientific objectivity'. Gaddis explains, "Their chief concern was rather to make sense out of the past and, if possible, the present; if in the process they shed a little light in the direction of the future, then so much the better. This does sometimes happen when insights derived from careful narration and thoughtful analogy – not from excessive deference to a now outmoded scientific method – can illuminate even quite distant futures" (Gaddis, 1992).

The discussion of US foreign policy in the Post-Western world will certainly be dominated by the discussion of the sound US foreign policy towards China. Nevertheless, an additional discussion related to the potential of US-Indonesia relations as a catalyst for regional stability is important in this case. Understanding this micro-interaction can help us to understand how the US pivot to Asia should be carried out in practice. The United States must recognize that every country in the region wants a better relationship with China as well as the United States. The U.S. military

deployment to some Southeast Asian countries has triggered greater tensions between the U.S. and China which may lead to regional instability.

Therefore, rather than using it to exclude China, pivot to Asia should be understood as a way to incorporate China within regional architecture. Moreover, re-pivot to Asia signaled an important message. The strategy tied together domestic concerns with international objectives. There is no 'America First' policy without 'global leadership'. The fact shows that America First policy is only making the world worse. The challenge is how to find a responsible engagement that can be supported by most Americans (Blinken & Kagan, 2019). Also, the narrative of US re-pivot to Asia emerged at a particularly difficult time. Both pandemic-related economic and strategic challenges generated powerful centripetal forces for the continuation of US leadership.

This article discusses four main historical periods: de-colonization, Cold War, US preponderance, and Post-Western eras. The first part discusses how the United States was not able to completely solve the complexity of the de-colonization question in the region. This unresolved issue partly contributed to the intensification of the Cold War. Furthermore, this section focuses more on the Southeast Asia region where most of its countries experienced this process. The next part examines further the implementation of the US containment strategy. Contrary to the previous calculation, Southeast Asia had become the hottest spot of the Cold War. This was the region where the United States had to bear nineteen years of costly war in Vietnam and several counterproductive covert and subversive operations in countries such as Laos and Indonesia. These Cold War legacies prove to be a very important part of understanding US ambiguity toward this region. This region's dynamic has provided both strategic fear and opportunity for the U.S. since the beginning of its engagement and more importantly, when it is deals with the question of China's rise.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Using Robert D. Kaplan's geopolitical conception of Asia, we can develop two different 'taxonomy' of Asian countries. Those different countries evolve and correlate with each other through significantly different paths. There are two main areas: the landscape of the Korean peninsula (Northeast Asia) and the seascape of the South China Sea. The landscape of Northeast Asia consists of relatively stronger and more developed states such as Japan, South Korea, China, and Taiwan. While the seascape consists of countries which currently a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the United States had traditionally focused its attention on Northeast Asia, America had typically lagged in its engagement with countries in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, the US faced more difficulties in this region during the initial years of its leadership. Therefore, this part gives more emphasis on US engagement in Southeast Asia.

The term Southeast Asia itself implies the 'insignificancy' of the region from the perspective of the regional powers. It was the southern part of China and the eastern part of India which are considered as the most prominent actors in the region. Nevertheless, this region had continuously become a contested area for great powers. Its abundant natural resources and strategic route for accessing the lucrative market of mainland China were the reason for that. Still, in the view of America, Southeast Asia was merely a sustaining factor for its main strategic region which is Europe.

Despite that fact, the United States had a very prominent role in the de-colonization process in Southeast Asia. American anticolonial pronouncements had inspired anti-colonial movements around the world, especially in Southeast Asia. Roosevelt gave several strong indications during the early years that he would support the principle of self-determination for all peoples, and not only applies to the parts of the world that border on the Atlantic. Furthermore, the de-colonization plan of the US represented a blend of American ideals with American interests. The free world of trade, investment, and transport would be beneficial for the US economy and strategic interest also. But at the end of the war, the US needed to do a tactical retreat from its anticolonial plan due to broader political, strategic, and military concerns. This region was essential for the interest of the US counterparts: the British, French, and Dutch. State Department representatives quietly reassured their counterparts late in 1944 that the United States would not contest their reassertion of sovereignty in Southeast Asia (McMahon, 1999, p. 13). Return to the status quo seemed to serve the best interest of the US and its partner countries.

Likewise, President Truman in his early months in an office pledged support for the sovereign authority of the European colonial powers. Some of the nuance, complexity and conditionality of Roosevelt's approach to the colonial problem were lost. World experience provides the ability to be flexible in determining strategy. Flexibility does not mean to be carried away by the circumstances, but the ability to sense the moment and adjust the course accordingly. Truman lacked world experience to be able to change the strategy when it is needed and not only adheres to the guidelines. John Lewis Gaddis mentions this skill when he compares George Kennan's strategy of containment and the NSC-68's. Kennan has skepticism of giving foreign policy authority to the bureaucracy which is equipped simply by a written policy guideline. Adding to that, Gaddis (2005) concludes, "International relations is too subtle and evanescent to be reduced to paper without oversimplification; once papers had been agreed upon it was too difficult to get bureaucracies to reconsider them in the light of changing circumstances."

Due to the difficulties of bureaucratic battles within government, Truman at the end sided openly with his European-minded subordinates who preferred restoration of status quo ante Bellum in Southeast Asia. For instance, he rejected Soekarno, the Indonesian president's request of him to be the mediator in the Indonesian and Dutch negotiation process. Truman's tilt toward the Dutch was due to his priority on the success of the Marshall Plan. The Netherlands' support was crucial especially in the face of a perceived global Soviet threat. America's domestic politics swung back US policy toward favoring of colonial independence, or balanced approach to be more precise. It was due to financial pressure, that the inflexibility of former colonial power in post-war settlements could jeopardize the support for the European reconstruction program.

The reestablishment of Dutch power in Indonesia was very important to this purpose. Even when the US position changed in favoring independence, H. Merle Cochran, the American observer at the Roundtable Conference at The Hague 1949, tried to convince the Republic to bear Dutch's debt as one of the prerequisites of sovereignty transfer. He aimed to make sure that Dutch withdrawal from Indonesia would not jeopardize the European reconstruction effort. While the US lacks patience

toward the Dutch's attitude toward its former colony, Americans were relatively consistent in their support of French rule in Indochina. The US needed to push for immediate policy change of their counterparts in dealing with the colonial question. US support for the independence of Southeast countries came only very slowly and with greater reluctance.

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF SUBVERSION

The importance of Southeast Asia for the US was increasing as Truman administration strategists recognized that this region was essential for the stability and prosperity of Japan too. By early 1950, the administration's senior planners convinced that both Western Europe and Japan's recovery could be aided by the stabilization and pacification of Southeast Asia. The reestablishment of traditional trading patterns was crucial for those countries' economic well-being. Moreover, it was also important to prevent Soviet's and also after 1949, communist China's influences from encroaching to this region. Political pressures reinforced the Truman administration's inclination to link Southeast Asian developments to larger issues (McMahon, 1999, p. 35). This was the root of US intervention in this region, especially in Indochina.

Indochina has strategic importance for communist advance. The Korean War, the Chinese Communist triumph, and the Soviet atomic bomb blast strengthen US strategic fears. Truman believed that a communist breakthrough anywhere in Southeast Asia would constitute humiliation and threat to US interests. Therefore, in mid-1950 he authorized US military support, economic aid, and political intervention throughout the region. Those three aspects which are derived from the Marshall Plan model are the essence of containment policy. Southeast Asia since then had become one of the forefronts of US containment policy against Communists.

When Eisenhower assumed the presidency in 1953, he articulated that his main goal in foreign affairs was to wrest the diplomatic initiative from communist powers. The foundation of Eisenhower's policy was largely laid down by the previous administration. He shared the conviction that the peoples of these new nations could not be trusted to govern themselves, and that neutralism threatened United States security, and that the People's Republic of China had the ambition to expand into Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Eisenhower acted more cautiously than Truman did. Rather than conducting open war, Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers preferred covert actions to manipulate the internal affairs of these new states, throughout the region, from Burma to Indonesia.

The other reasons were the inability to answer the question of how high the stakes of the US in Southeast Asia properly and also Eisenhower's reliance on nuclear strategy. Therefore, the US restricted itself more to economic and defense assistance, technical support, political advice, and diplomatic backing instead of direct engagement. By the end of the decade, South Vietnam ranked as the fifth leading recipient of US aid worldwide, receiving approximately \$250 million annually. With more than 1,500 Americans in South Vietnam advising the government, the American Embassy in Saigon stood as the largest US diplomatic mission in the world. The main purpose of US policy in this containment policy was to search for post-war stability in the region. Despite the difficulties of facing the problem of a Viet Minh breakthrough at Dienbienphu in the spring of 1954, the Eisenhower administration kept to its position on

not conducting an intervention. These various reasons had avoided the US from massive confrontation with Soviet or China.

The increasing importance of Southeast Asia for the US did not necessarily mean that its stability was equal to the survival of Western order, even in the peak of the confrontation during the Vietnam War. The US policymakers miscalculated the importance of this region in the power balance equation that led to power overextension of the US. Later on, the US was trapped in the conflict and hardly able to disentangle from it. By showing the evidence that there was no balance of power catastrophe after US disengagement in Vietnam, Robert McMahon stresses the exaggeration of the importance of Southeast Asia in the regional balance of power. Moreover, the most consistent failure of US officials has been an inability to appreciate the importance of Asian nationalism and to work with, rather than against that powerful force.

In Indonesia, the Eisenhower administration approved an unsuccessful CIA operation. In 1957, he assisted arm rebel forces in Sumatra and Sulawesi. In a final irony, Indonesia's increased arms purchases from the Soviet bloc during the rebellion became a justification within the Eisenhower administration for reconciliation with Sukarno. By late 1958, there was large-scale military assistance in support of a government that the CIA had been trying to overthrow a few months earlier. It is debatable whether this action was part of a flexible response or a sign of ambiguity. Kennedy continued this approach with a slightly different style soon he entered the office (Kahin & Kahin, 1997). Kennedy showed more reliance on his judgments rather than his team or bureaucracy's advice. This approach was very responsive and effective in dealing with the crisis. Nevertheless, it lacked scrutiny and policy alternatives.

Johnson also shares similar leadership traits as Kennedy to a certain extent. He trusted more on individual judgment than the bureaucratic process of foreign policymaking. Nevertheless, he still listened to his trustful advisers and not only depended on his judgment. One of the fiercest polemics on domino theory was the debate over the 1965 military takeover in Indonesia. This turnover happened and shifted Indonesia closer to the West but only at a very expensive price. One report gave a figure of almost 500,000 Indonesian suspected communists were being massacred by the new military regime. The Johnson administration immediately embraced this new Indonesian military regime of Soeharto. Moreover, the Johnson administration proclaimed "that had we not stood firm in Vietnam in 1965, Communists could well have taken power in Indonesia". George T. Kahin, one of the prominent scholars on Southeast Asia politics, furiously rejected this claim and demonstrated that there were no links between the US commitment to South Vietnam and events in Indonesia, and this claim was intended to rationalize Johnson officials' beleaguered position in Southeast Asia.

Gulf of Tonkin incident on August 2, 1964, marked the US further involvement in Indochina, particularly Vietnam. President Johnson and his adviser believed that the US had no choice other than to fight in Vietnam because it was the only way to contain China. Johnson declared that the success of Communist China in Vietnam could produce a 'Red Asia'. Kahin argued that the conclusion was illogical and ahistorical. If the purpose is to contain China, rather than infusing American military power, America

should pursue a ceasefire and negotiated settlement so the US could take advantage of “the historic Vietnamese fear and antagonism towards China”. In addition, the Communist Vietminh were not ready to surrender everything they won over ten or eleven years of painful fighting since 1954. The only way to contain Beijing’s power was to have political settlement and support Southeast Asia countries to be able to develop independently.

As slightly discussed before, one of the interesting features of US policy toward Asia or US foreign policy, in general, was the role of bureaucracy besides the presidents themselves. Bureaucratic battles within government especially within the State Department constantly influenced the implementation of the policy. The dominant Eurocentric perception among officials and later on the pressure from McCarthyism were influential in US policy toward Southeast Asia. Kahin notes that the similarity of Dutch culture to Americans’ created public sympathy toward Dutch especially during the Japanese occupation of the archipelago while they know nothing about the suffering of the indigenous people under Dutch colonialization. Public involvement was also an important part of foreign policy. What happened in the past seems to prevail in the future. American power will be transformed not only by the power distribution at the international level but also by its society.

AMERICA PREPONDERANCE AND CHINA’S RISE

US preponderance power does not necessarily mean it negates any possibility of other countries to rise. Indeed, its preponderance is partly responsible for the rise of the rest. William C. Wohlforth (1999) lays out pieces of evidence that this preponderance power is unprecedented in history due to its completeness, peacefulness, and durability. The feature that differentiates the post-western world and the previous one is on the level of decisiveness. As the most powerful state in the world, the US cannot solve all matters by itself. It needs to accommodate other powers too in solving global problems.

The collapse of the Socialist bloc was not merely a passing of a particular period of postwar history, but it was a fundamental transition in world history as argued by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). The world saw the triumph of Western Liberalism and evident in the total exhaustion of other systemic alternatives. Furthermore, he argues that it was the endpoint of human ideological evolution and the progressive nature of the history toward the globalization of democracy and the free market. Numerous countries started to embrace democratization and/or marketization, which are the two liberalism tenets of political stability and prosperity. Contrary to his prediction, the post-Cold War era has not been a century of boredom. There have been various unintended outcomes that resulted from this universalization. One of these was China’s rise.

Emerging powers will bring their unique political values and aspirations to the table. The rising powers have different views on political legitimacy, the rules of international trade, and the relationship between the state and society, therefore, they will challenge the prevailing values of the current system. More importantly, the relationship between status quo power and the rising powers should be seen not in a deterministic way. China’s economic rise has indeed contributed enormously to the continuous economic growth of the Western hemisphere, but it also poses a threat to

the stability of the region. For instance, China's economic boost had stalled the Asian tigers' economic miracle. China's opening in the 1990s and the devaluation of the Yuan made Southeast Asian countries lose their economic competitiveness which later on resulted in the Asian Financial Crisis. Even more so, China's economic rise has contributed significantly to China's overall power capabilities. A strong China is beneficial for the system, but only at a certain level. As we can see nowadays, China's power projection starts to collide with the interest of other Asian countries and the US. The increasing tension in the South China Sea can be used as the empirical evidence of that statement.

The South China Sea is the heart of Eurasia's navigable rim land, punctuated by the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits. While the Strait of Hormuz or the Persian Gulf is the main passage for energy transportation, the South China Sea is energy and other commercial transportation passage. More than half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage passes through these choke points, and a third of all maritime traffic worldwide. The oil transported through the Malacca Straits from the Indian Ocean, *en-route* to East Asia through the South China Sea, is triple the amount that passes through the Suez Canal and fifteen times the amount that transits the Panama Canal. Roughly two-thirds of South Korea's energy supplies, nearly 60 percent of Japan's and Taiwan's energy supplies, and 80 percent of China's crude oil imports come through the South China Sea.

Not only is South China Sea a global transportation route, but several studies also mention that it contains an abundance of energy resources and a great number of fisheries. Chinese calculation mentions that this area can yield 130 billion barrels of oil, which makes it relatively equal to Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil reserve. Until now, the South China Sea has already proven an oil reserve of seven billion barrels and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

This development put the existence of Southeast Asian countries in danger. Indeed, China is enveloping Asia not only militarily but economically as well. This makes the current dispute over this area difficult to solve. Brunei claims a southern reef of the Spratly Islands. Malaysia claims tree islands in the Spratlys. The Philippines claims eight islands in the Spratlys and significant portions of the South China Sea. Vietnam, Taiwan, and China each claim much of the South China Sea, as well as all of the Spratly and Paracel Island groups. China has been consistent in claiming the heart of the entire South China Sea in a grand loop as its historic line. The cow's tongue as the loop is called stretches from the surrounding islands groups from China's Hainan Island south 1,200 miles to near Singapore and Malaysia. This claim prevents all initiatives for example Vietnam and Malaysia in dividing the seabed and subsoil resources to happen.

Geopolitically speaking, China is the only indigenous great power threat in these waters. Adding to that, China's obsession with the South China Sea is also reasonable. The entire northern boundary of the South China Sea is formed by the Chinese mainland. A full half of its seaboard is oriented southward toward the South China Sea, while the other half oriented eastward toward the Bohai, Yellow, and East China Seas. Furthermore, these conflicting claims are likely to become more acute as energy consumption in these countries is expected to double by 2030.

Of course, the major war might be avoided due to the geographical nature of the South China Sea which so-called the stopping power of water. Unlike land-based conflict, naval conflict is much more difficult to operate. The South China Sea will more or less become a purely naval competition argues Kaplan (2015). Moreover, the asymmetric interdependence relations between China and the Southeast Asian countries will provide a disincentive for conflict. Power imbalance will create what Kaplan defined as the Finlandization of the Southeast Asian countries and ASEAN as its organizational grouping. The Chinese influence over those countries will be so immense which makes their freedom nominal. In practice, China's interest dictates those countries' policies. The term Finlandization means "to become like Finland" referring to the influence of the Soviet Union on Finland's policies during the Cold War.

Although everybody agrees that China's rise presents a threat to regional stability, but there is no clear consensus on how severe this threat for US interests. Exaggerating China's threat will make the US repeat the same mistake during the Vietnam War. But providing too much space for China's expansion without keeping it in check, will be a risky policy too. President Obama's judgment on this matter seems to be relevant to the contemporary power dynamic. China's failure is more dangerous than China's rise. Obama believes that the US has more to fear from a weakened, threatened China than a successful, rising China. He articulately states:

If China fails; if it is not able to maintain a trajectory that satisfies its population and has to resort to nationalism as an organizing principle; if it feels so overwhelmed that it never takes on the responsibilities of a country its size in maintaining the international order; if it views the world only in terms of regional spheres of influence—then not only do we see the potential for conflict with China, but we will find ourselves having more difficulty dealing with these other challenges that are going to come (Goldberg, 2016).

In the short run, the economic performance and increase in the military budget of China can be intimidating. This development has led to a hype of the future of China's global role. For instance, Martin Jacques (2012) published one of the most popular books on the 'rise of the rest': *When China Rules the World*, argues that China, as a 'civilization-state', would rise on its terms. Its impact would be not only economic but also cultural and political, leading to a global future of 'contested modernity'. The book has been translated into eleven languages and sold over a quarter of a million copies worldwide. Another popular book on the rise of the rest, Fareed Zakaria's *Post-American World* sees the "rise of the rest" - the growth of countries like China, India, Brazil, Russia, and many others - as the great story of our time, and one that will reshape the world (Zakaria, 2011). Even someone who rejects America's decline thesis, such as Josef Joffe acknowledges the importance of China. He dedicates almost half part of his book on *The Myth of America's Decline* in assessing China's rise. Although he believes China is still far behind the U.S., he confirms that we cannot dismiss China's presence as the global power of the future (Joffe, 2014).

Furthermore, China's international involvement has also increased significantly. Dating back to the Asian financial crisis and its economic engagement in Africa in 1997-1998, China has actively established multilateral arrangements with countries within these regions. Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) was set up by ASEAN+3 countries including China as an alternative currency pool resource outside the IMF. In Africa,

China's engagement there tends to create controversy. Some argue that China has conducted a new form of colonialism in Africa due to its intention to find cheap labor and resources. Yet, many studies show that China's investment is quite diverse and welcomed by African public opinion.

The investment in Africa over the period 1998—2012 includes about 2,000 Chinese firms investing in 49 African countries. China invests also in non-resource-rich countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda besides the resource-rich countries like Nigeria and South Africa (Chen & Tang, 2015). China has begun to deeply engage with Latin America recently. Chinese businessman, Wang Jing with the approval and support of the Chinese Government has been building a new canal in Nicaragua. This construction has begun in January 2015 and will cost around the US 40 billion dollars. If completed, it will be the largest civil engineering and construction project in history. China is also planning to build a transcontinental railway (5,300 km) that will transport raw materials especially soybeans from Brazil to Peru's Pacific Coast and later on a ship to China (Stuenkel, 2015).

Moreover, not only in trade and investment but China has also been actively promoting the internationalization of the Renminbi (RMB). China aims to reduce its dependence on the dollar and increase its competitiveness and at the same time, it is advocating a multilateral monetary world. In 2009 when China established the dim sum bond market and expanded the Cross-Border Trade RMB Settlement Pilot Project, it helped establish pools of offshore RMB liquidity. Moreover, China has signed a currency swap agreement with several countries. RMB is currently the second most used currency in trade financing and reach the ninth position in forex trading.

Nonetheless, we should not be distracted by trends. There is sufficient evidence that this economic growth is not sustainable in the long run. In August 2015, China's stock market suffered the biggest one-day fall since 2007 (The Economist, 2015). Recently, its investment in Africa fell by more than 40 percent year-on-year in the first half of 2015. Overall, China's economic growth has not been recovered since the latest financial crisis of 2008. Michael Mandelbaum mentions that China's economic growth was built on a weak foundation. It was lack of creativity due to its centralized system. Even he mentions that the real trade surplus is quite small, while China has a trade deficit with supplier countries.

China imports Dell computer's parts from Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, assembles it, and export to the US. From this commodity, it is only less than 4 percent of the value stays in China (Mandelbaum, 2014). Furthermore, Josef Joffe uses the term 'modernitarianism' to show the weakness of China's development model compares to the US' liberal society model. Despite the high economic growth at that time, China eventually will slow down. Its rapid growth will be replaced by labor costs grow, corruption, and rent-seeking spread, the population ages, political expectations rise, and the export-led growth model runs out of steam (Joffe, 2014). Every country experiences a "flush moment" of their rise due to many changes and disruptions in the international system.

Moreover, the increase in the military budget should not be confused by power efficacy. The weakness in the organization and lack of regional or global military alliance shows that China has a very limited military threat. China has been improving and expanding its military capabilities over the past two decades, yet its military

deployment is limited to China's sovereign territory, its Asian maritime littoral, or under international peacekeeping mission to other regions.

The Naval Forces are the ones that made the greatest advances in terms of global power projection. The reasons are because of the issue of Taiwan, the desire to have a blue water presence throughout the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, and the development of China's shipbuilding industry. In terms of doctrine, since the 1990s it has built its capabilities to adapt into two broad scenarios. The need to have the offensive capability (particularly amphibious and subsurface) to respond to Taiwan issue, and defensive capability to deny outside naval forces (especially US Navy). Moreover, the blue water naval forces are needed to secure the international sea line that China's economy depends on. China's naval inventory today has more than 300 vessels (the largest in Asia) includes 78 principal surface combatant ships: 13 destroyers and 65 frigates. Also, there are 211 patrol and combatant craft, 73 mine warfare vessels, 210 amphibious landing ships and craft, 205 logistics and support ships, and 71 submarines.

But overall, it is still far from being a global military power. It does not have a global reach yet. There are some factors of the limit of technology, organizational structure, and culture but importantly, it is more on the ambivalence of China in perceiving its global military presence: its lack of military alliance and the importance of economic development. The lack of alliance shows China has yet gained legitimacy from other countries. Its capability is relatively astonishing at least regionally, but there is no benign intention of China that makes trust difficult to achieve. Its lack of efficacy also prevents other countries to seek assistance from China when they need help. They are still in doubt whether China is the right one to ask for assistance.

Altogether, the evidence shows China's rise is short-lived. China seems to be in decline rather than on the rise. US pivot to Asia should be repositioned not in a way to contain China which can exacerbate the problems but to focus more on mitigating the consequences of China's decline. China's growth has been unsustainable recently. There is a big question on how resilient China is in facing any economic or socio-political shock. Probably, weakened China will be visible faster than we all predicted. US pivot to Asia should be utilized to rebuild a new regional structure that accommodates these trends and dynamics.

INDONESIA AND REPOSITIONING US PIVOT TO ASIA

The U.S. rebalances towards Asia policy has engaged the U.S. and Indonesia in a more enhanced relationship than both have ever had. Currently, both countries are tied in a bilateral agreement called the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership, launched in 2010. The partnership covered up broad sectors from education to security development. Moreover, after President Jokowi visited the US in October 2015, both countries have agreed to formally elevate bilateral ties to the level of strategic partnership. As a middle power country that does not have great military and economic capability but gaining influence through its normative power, Indonesia has something to offer in the repositioning of the US pivot to Asia. To be more specific, by analyzing the problems and prospects of the US-Indonesia bilateral relationship, we can learn how the pivot to Asia should be implemented in the practice.

Indonesia achieved this regional power status mostly due to its success in its democratic transition and economic development. According to Amitav Acharya (2014), the fact that Indonesia has successfully consolidated its democracy, stabilized its economy, and achieved greater internal stability creates a virtuous cycle for Indonesia. Indonesia's economic position is changing from that of being a low-income country to a middle-income country and from being aid beneficiary to both beneficiary and donor. It gives Indonesia a great deal of credibility within Southeast Asia and the region as a whole. As a result, this regional credibility provides space for Indonesia to be more active at the global level.

The distinct aspects of Indonesia's foreign policy compare to BRICS or other G20 countries are to use regional legitimacy as the foundation for global status. Indonesia perceives its role in terms of a concentric circle, with ASEAN as its first circle, then ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, and South Korea) as the second circle, then the US and EU as its main economic partners, and the last circle contains other developing countries. Overall, the key to status in international affairs begins at home. This is the basis for Indonesia's foreign policy. As the sixth president of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono states that: "Progress in the domestic arena helps international role in the region and the world. To be an emerging power, a precondition is a political stability, (and) national stability" (Acharya, 2014).

Indonesia relates to other major powers through the principles of independent and active foreign policy, for instance, in the US-Indonesia bilateral relation. The leaders from both countries pointed the shared values among both countries. The US and Indonesia are committed to democratic values, human rights, and a vibrant civil society. Of course, common values are not the main driver for the relationship. Strategic consideration of the rise of China plays a crucial part. From the US perspective, Indonesia has the highest credibility to contain China's influence. The strong and independent Indonesia is in the US interest. Indonesia has the strategic importance of the US interest in the freedom of navigation. With the rise of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, Indonesia plays a crucial role through ASEAN and especially ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which is a multilateral forum for official consultations on peace and security where both countries actively participate in it.

However, a closer look suggests the notion of strong and independent Indonesia possesses the challenge for the true extent of convergence of interests between Jakarta and Washington. The US often complained about the lack of clarity of Indonesia's support on the US position. Indonesia's foreign policy outlook in general and its cautious position on the South China Sea in particular prevent it from expressing strong public words of support for the United States. This is especially the case given the importance the current administration has placed on boosting economic ties with China.

Meanwhile, Indonesia is always responding to US leadership cautiously. Indonesia itself perceives US leadership as an important factor for global stability. As President Yudhoyono asserted, "None of these global challenges can be addressed by the world community without having America on-board. And conversely, none of these issues can be resolved by the United States alone" (Acharya, 2014). This statement does not necessarily mean that both countries always agree on every global issue. Although Indonesia is always supportive of US leadership, it did not seek an alliance

with the US. Indonesia is always aiming to create a neutral zone in the region. This is the basic philosophy of Indonesia's foreign policy: to be independent and active globally.

In the case of the South China Sea, Indonesia neither opposes U.S. preservation of freedom of navigation nor condones China's growing assertiveness. Jakarta is merely concerned that such actions risk exacerbating U.S.-China rivalry, thereby undermining regional stability and Indonesia's national autonomy by forcing it to pick sides argues Prashanth Parameswaran from the Brookings Institute. Moreover, he warns Indonesian leaders that if Indonesia does not demonstrate its value as a strategic partner, Washington's patience may soon wear thin and Jakarta's position within the growing list of U.S. partners in the Asia-Pacific may suffer as a result (Parameswaran, 2014).

This situation is not unique only for US-Indonesia bilateral relationship. Neutrality in terms of maintaining bonding both with the US and China is the main concern of all Southeast Asian countries. Due to their limited economic and military capability, they cannot afford to pick a side and risking their well-being to the close or faraway great powers. Geography plays important role in forming the aspiration of neutrality. Moreover, the polemic of neutrality is not a new thing as we can see from our historical discussion of US engagement in Asia. There has constantly been a huge gap in how the US and these Asian countries understand neutrality. There is a persistent legacy of the Cold War in this relationship. Repositioning pivot to Asia means to readjust US response to Asian neutrality. Rather than seeing neutrality as an obstacle, pivot to Asia should embrace it. It is a fact that the US should live with that. Failing to address that will only make the pivot to Asia unpopular for the Southeast Asian countries. In their minds, pivot to Asia means returning to the traditional power politics game that leads to regional instability.

Indonesia has consistently advocated a 'dynamic equilibrium' approach to foreign policy. The cooperation was based on inclusive friendship where no power is dominant or excluded. This concept made up a web of mutual relationships that lead countries to work toward common security despite trust deficits and differences. Indonesia has been consistently promoted this approach within ASEAN, East Asia Summit, and even G20. Pivot to Asia should be understood in terms of more involvement of the US in the region without excluding China or other powers in the process.

RE-PIVOT TO ASIA IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD ORDER

The post-pandemic world order seems to strengthen the notion of 'No One's World' suggested by Charles Kupchan in 2012. The one thing he missed was the cause of the world order transformation. Rather than a political cause, a global health issue, the Covid-19 pandemic, is and will be the major force of this transformation. The book is the sequel of his previous work on the issue of the Post-Western World. In 2002, he published *The End of the American Era*, a book explaining the decline of America's supremacy and the transition to the multipolar world. The next book is *How Enemies Become Friends*, which was published in 2010, examines how different countries ended their enmity and become friends. He intends to discuss the possibility of preserving peace in the passing of the unipolar moment. *No One's World* serves not

only as a logical consequence of his previous works, but it also expands previous studies on the shifting balance of power in the world by examining how that shift will mean for how the world works.

Moreover, it discusses the struggle of Rest – especially China, India, Russia, Turkey, and Brazil to rise and how these emerging powers will bring their unique political values and aspirations to the table. The rising powers have different views on political legitimacy, the rules of international trade, and the relationship between the state and society, therefore, they will challenge the prevailing values of the current system. Nonetheless, the existence of a challenge does not necessarily mean conflict. It depends on how we manage that, argues Kupchan. According to him, the new global order will be both multipolar and politically diverse, yet it can be peaceful (Kupchan, 2012).

The Covid-19 brought up more discussion about American decline. The US is perceived to be too weak in responding to the pandemic, particularly compared to China's effective taming of the disease. The United State's poor handling of the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted weaknesses in its domestic system and increased doubt about the image of the US as the world's leader (Zakaria, 2020). However, as Zakaria argues, based on traditional metrics of power; military power, and economic heft, the US is still the strongest nation in the world. What has shifted in recent years, particularly under the Trump presidency, is America's "soft power". America's appeal and its capacity to set the agenda is declining. Re-pivot to Asia should be designed with an understanding of this shift.

Both Trump and Biden understand the significance of Asia or the Indo-Pacific region for the US interests. However, the new re-pivot to Asia should be different from Obama's 'pivot to Asia', which is dominantly motivated by containing China. Re-pivot should bring practical economic, strategic, and political benefits to Asian countries, rather than just focusing on how to prove China's alternatives are worse than American regional leadership (Dunst, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The Trump 'America First' policy seems to be a 'temporary pause' for the pivot to Asia. On contrary, in practice, the US has never and will never stop its engagement to the region. The US has always been visible in Asia. Moreover, although the slogan of the "Asian Century" has not yet fulfilled its promise fully, the continent will still play an increasing role in American foreign policy going forward. The re-pivot is not reversible, particularly as the rest of the world continues to matter.

Therefore, rather than calling for a pause or change in its foreign policy focus, the US should redefine the pivot. There are two important aspects of 'overhauling' the strategy. Firstly, rather than using pivot as a means to counter China's rise, it should be reoriented to mitigating China's possible decline. As many experts have predicted, there are some trends in China's decline. Weak China is more dangerous both for China itself and the region as a whole. A strong China might threaten regional stability, but a weak China creates instability.

Secondly, the Indonesia-US bilateral relationship gives many lessons on how to conduct the pivot in practice. The strategy should be redefined to accommodate the

need of Southeast Asian nations to be neutral and independent. Enforcing alliances with these countries proved to be counterproductive. Building strong, independent and proactive Southeast Asia countries should be the goal of the US pivot to Asia. Moreover, both the US and Southeast countries should move on from the Cold War baggage and start to see US engagement and Southeast Asia's neutrality as two sides of the same coin. More importantly, with the increasing gap between the US capability and complexity of the global problems, the US can focus more on strengthening the regional architecture of ASEAN rather than focusing on individual countries. Therefore, the US can maintain the momentum of the Asian Century in its hand without bearing too much cost.

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