
Balancing Grand Strategy for America to Offset Thucydides's Trap with China

Anubhav S. Goswami

*Ph.D. Student, O.P Jindal Global University, Centre for Air Powers Studies,
anubhavshankar100@gmail.com*

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Abstract

China's vastly increased economic and military might has alarmed the United States about sustaining its relative power in the world. Observing the growing influence of Beijing in the international world order, experts of 'great power competition' are now asking: *What will be the reaction of the United States once China achieves parity or even comes close to achieving parity with Washington?* As could be expected from its nature, the question has generated sharp polarising viewpoints but none has spawned more interest and controversy than Harvard Professor Graham T. Allison's 'Thucydides' Trap' discourse which argues that China's spectacular rise could lead to a violent yet avoidable war with the United States along the lines of previous conflicts between a *ruling* power and a *rising* power. This study describes that if the United States continues to pursue its hegemonic grand strategy, it will accelerate the conflict which might trigger the Thucydides' trap with China. The aim and objective of this study is to recommend a revision in the United States grand strategy from hegemony to a 'balancing' strategy to reduce the risk of strategic rivalry with China turning into a full-blown war.

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Introduction

In 1997 Christopher Layne, while analyzing the prevailing American grand strategy of hegemony, famously wrote, “The changing distribution of power in the international system - specifically, the relative decline of U.S. power and the corresponding rise of new great powers - will render the strategy untenable.”¹ By the statement he meant the American grand strategy of hegemony is unsuitable and ineffective in a multipolar world because over time new powers will resent American predominance as it stands in the path of rising powers trying to create a space for themselves in the global governance system. As the international system moves from unipolarity to multipolarity with the rise of European Union (EU), China, India, and Russia, it has become imperative for the United States to revise its grand strategy if it is serious about maintaining its relative position in the world in 21st century.

China’s re-emergence as a major power has generated considerable debate on how the United States, the current established Superpower, will react once Beijing has achieved parity or even comes close to achieving parity with Washington. Of the many views on future framework of Sino-American relationship, none has generated more interest and controversy than Graham T. Allison’s Thucydides’s Trap discourse which argues that China’s spectacular rise could lead to a violent yet avoidable war with the United States like previous conflicts between a ruling power and a rising power.² Alison was influenced by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides’s view on Peloponnesian War which states that the rise of Athens spawned fears in Sparta, an already established power, putting heavy structural stresses on their bilateral relationship that made a violent clash possible.³

To prevent such structural stress spiraling out of control in their bilateral relationship, Allison proposes four potential strategic options for U.S. leaders to address the issue of Thucydides’s Trap with China. The options are:

1. Accommodate China—an effort to give up its attempts to maintain strategic primacy in the Asia-Pacific,
2. Undermine
3. Negotiate a Long Peace with China to focus on more urgent priorities, particularly their own domestic affairs,

4. Redefine the Relationship—propose a “new type of great power relations” (Alison borrows this idea from Xi Jinping).⁴

However, Alison did not consider that China has quietly abandoned the idea of the new type of great power relation. With the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) mega-infrastructure project and defense of globalization at Davos in 2017, Xi Jinping is setting China on course to don the mantle of global leadership. This confidence came from the fact that China was projected to become half-again larger than the United States in terms of GDP PPP (Gross Domestic Product in terms of Purchasing Power Parity) by 2024.⁵ Its economy has also proven to be more resilient than U.S. economy during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the only major economy to grow in 2020, China believes it can shape the post-pandemic world.

Negotiating a long peace with China would require both Washington and Beijing to find common cause with each other on domestic issues that require urgent attention like climate change or inequality/equitable growth. However, given the huge ‘strategic distrust’ between the two nations, overcoming a sense of insecurity about the other’s intention will be a tall task.⁶ As far undermining China is concerned, Alison himself is not in favor of that option due to the enormous risk involved in subverting/sabotaging China. Accommodating Beijing is the best option America has in this era defining strategic competition. After the end of World War two, America had recognized Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. This had kept cold war remain cold and not escalate into a hot war. With China’s rise, if the United States do not adapt to the new balance of power, risk of future confrontations increases. At the same time accommodation is not akin to appeasement. America’s compromise should come with conditions. Such an adaptability with a premium on negotiated accommodation requires a change in U.S. grand strategy from hegemony and primacy to a ‘balancing’ strategy.

Aim of the Study

This article acknowledges the existence of a Thucydides’s Trap in the power relation between the United States and China. Based on that assumption, this study has two-fold aims and objectives in:

- Describing why United States and China are likely to fall in a Thucydides’s Trap.

- Prescribing why a shift in Washington's grand strategy from hegemony to 'balancing' strategy could prevent the outbreak of a Thucydides's Trap with Beijing.

While framing its arguments on why there is a likelihood of a war between America and China, the article relies heavily on the ideas of 'Realist' approach to international relations, particularly Offensive Realism.

A likely criticism of this article will be that it scrutinizes only the role of United States' in creating conditions for the existence of a Thucydides's trap as well as avoiding it with China. The reason this study does not prescribe any policy recommendations to China for course correction is because according to classical realism, a weak society lacks the norms and institutions to mute its struggle for power. Because China is an authoritarian state, its illiberal instincts will reinforce itself in its external behavior in the absence of domestic norms and institutions. Since, the United States is a democracy, it could be expected to subordinate its state goals to the requirement of justice in the international order. Therefore, only United States' role in the Thucydides's Trap and how it can avoid the trap with China is discussed.

United States and China Today

Before establishing the fact regarding the existence of a trap in their bilateral relationship, it is important to understand why China and the U.S. are seeing a structural competition in their bilateral relationship which is central to building a future trajectory of possible war between the two countries. Evan S. Medeiros suggests that there has been a decline in the scope of important buffers in the bilateral relationship, which has opened the floodgates of two kinds of competition: Structural competition (Asia's rise, security competition, economics, technology, and global governance) as well as cyclical competitions (previous Trump administration's alleged lack of a coherent strategy and policy toward China and his combative style).⁷

At the same time, important buffers like the decline in support for each other within the political leadership in both Washington and Beijing has driven a wedge between these bilateral divides. China's rise is seen increasingly as a challenge to the U.S. interests in Asia at a time when the continent has gained long-term importance to the United States

and world. Asia generates two thirds of global growth, accounts for 40 percent of global GDP and hosts half of the 20 fastest growing economies.⁸ According to a report by PwC in 2015, China was supposed to have surpassed U.S. GDP by 2028.⁹ However, a London-based think tank, Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), in its latest global economy ranking predicted that China will overtake the United States in 2030.¹⁰

As Beijing grows in power, it is trying to stamp its complete hegemony over a significantly important Asia. It wants to re-alter the rules-based order championed by America and its allies in the region to a hierarchical order where China is the primary power. To weaken the American alliance structure in East Asia, China is systematically raising the costs for U.S. allies who take actions China sees as undermining its interests.¹¹ To that effect, it is modernizing its military to constraint U.S. power projection capabilities in the Western Pacific. As a result, security competition between Washington and Beijing in East Asia is increasing. Add to that is the maritime territorial disputes in South China Sea and East China Sea which has become a new focus of United States-China security competition.

Another motivating feature of the United States-China security competition is the manifold rise in tensions between mainland China and Taiwan in recent times. Thucydides had said that the weaker parties are also guided by the same three factors in its elements of leadership and political decisions as Rising and Ruling powers are: Fear (national security), Honor (national status and societal values) and Interest (prosperity and economic advantage).¹² Weaker parties can manipulate stronger ones using these basic motives, just as Corcyra and Corinth enabled Athens and Sparta to fall for Peloponnesian war.¹³ This is worth noting because Taiwan is under seize from China's wolf-warrior diplomacy and its irredentist tendencies. Confirming the volatility in the Taiwan strait, a recent Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) study argues that the most obvious and likely source of conflict between the United States and China will be Taiwan.¹⁴

If China assumes that Taipei is steadily moving towards independence, Beijing might feel that its window of unifying Taiwan with the Mainland without force will shrink bit by bit.¹⁵ A decision for overt strike on Taiwan would continue gaining ground in Beijing if the scope for peaceful unification keeps dwindling. In the United States, Taiwan's determination to preserve its liberal democracy has won her sympathy

and support from American public, raising the cost to American politicians of turning their backs on the island.¹⁶ The key implication drawn from here is that this could draw the United States, despite its best judgement, into the conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan, in short, could become the eponymous Thucydides's Trap for the United States and China.

Another fading buffer that Medeiros talks about is the decline in economic ties and reduced enthusiasm for China from the U.S. business community. Xi Jinping's decision to embark Chinese economy on producing high value-added goods and services has led to the decline of the degree of complementarity in Chinese and U.S. exports.¹⁷ U.S. businesses have recently found it difficult to penetrate Chinese market due to preferential policies, laws, regulations, and administrative actions of the Chinese government in support of domestic industries.¹⁸ Medeiros claims that due to this breakdown in the natural complementarity between the two economies, Beijing and Washington have become more competitive with each other, creating tension.¹⁹

At another level of the economic domain, deep integration of United States and Chinese technology production supply chains is becoming a source of vulnerability for the U.S. defense industrial base due to China's efforts (both legitimate and illicit) to acquire technological superiority in civilian sectors of its economy such as artificial intelligence, robotics, quantum computing, and autonomous vehicles.²⁰ Certain technologies that give the U.S. military strategic and tactical advantages have their roots in global commercial markets which are now exposed to predatory Chinese economic practices.

Policymakers in Beijing and Washington believe that mastery over foundational technologies is essential to control the global economy in the twenty-first century as it will give edge in innovation, productivity, and national security.²¹ Therefore, China and the United States are in an intense competition to dominate technologies critical to future innovation, like semiconductors, super computers, quantum computing, autonomous vehicles, artificial intelligence, robotics, 5G and next generation communications, and biotechnology and genetics.

Beijing and Washington are also competing for stamping their vision for global governance. The current global governance system is rules-based order exhibiting liberal democratic values and standards.

Beijing's alternative vision is a system based on authoritarian governance principles where collective rights and interests are more important than individual rights and interests, and that the State must speak on the collective's behalf to determine its interests.²² Beijing is trying to convince the global community that the authoritarian order is better than democratic world-order led by America where individuals have inalienable rights that the State cannot take away.

Finally, there is a decline in the stabilizing value of nuclear weapons in the bilateral relationship of China and United States. For the longest time, nuclear weapons never materialized in their geopolitical dimensions. Now China is building a nuclear force meant to back its conventional forces in conflict against U.S. allies over the maritime territorial issue by deterring the United States from intervening in a conflict "that did not directly threaten the United States if there was a risk that the conflict could escalate to the nuclear level."²³ Chinese nuclear strategy, therefore, is trying to check U.S. nuclear dominance and 'nuclear blackmailing' in order to win conventional conflicts in its strategic geography.

If China manages to expand the nuclear threshold with an eye on eroding conventional deterrence vis-à-vis U.S. allies in the region, this might compel Washington to allocate larger role for nuclear weapons like tactical bombs to compensate for any loss in conventional military superiority.²⁴ This will lead to a new dimension of strategic competition previously unseen in United States-China bilateral relationship. China's alleged successful testing of hypersonic glide vehicle and United States' desperation to catch-up to the new technology is an indication of things to come. Thus, the primacy of competition and an augmented risk of conflict and confrontation will now characterize the new phase of the United States-China relationship.

Hegemonic Grand Strategy in the Context of Thucydides's Trap

Alison's work captured the attention of leaders in both Washington and Beijing. As a confidence-building measure, China laid out the concept of 'New Type of Great Power Relation' in 2013 based on cooperation; respect to each other's core interests; and dialogue between Washington and Beijing. The concept emphasizes that the United States and other neighboring countries should respect the core interests of China, in other words acknowledging Beijing's territorial

claims in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.²⁵ The United States distanced itself from Beijing's proposed framework as Washington realized giving recognition to Beijing's "core interest" would tantamount to legitimizing China's disputed territorial claims as well as giving away lopsided concessions in East Asia.²⁶ While United States is well within its right to protect its interests, China views Washington's skepticism as arrogantly holding on to its primacy in the international system and denying a rising China her rightful place. China claims such attitude "dangerous or even irresponsible" because it can exacerbate both countries' progress towards the apocalyptic Thucydides's Trap, thereby, exploiting "perceptions of the trap by blaming the United States for trying to keep China down."²⁷

One of the reasons for China's ability to peddle such a narrative is due to U.S. foreign policy stubbornly holding on to a hegemonic grand strategy even in a multipolar world. Christopher Layne defined U.S. hegemonic grand strategy as a "strategy of preponderance"—in simple terms—a strategy to maintain primacy in the world through pre-eminent U.S. political, military, and economic power.²⁸ With China already an established pole, Beijing expects Washington to share the economic-security dual leadership of the world. The key implication here is that China's outward-facing policies will inevitably clash with United States' preponderance or hegemonic status. In 2008, U.S. National Intelligence Council report argued that America should adjust its international ambitions and forgo continued primacy in favor of accommodating the rising powers in the interest of greater global governance.²⁹

If the United States continues to pursue its hegemonic grand strategy, it will accelerate the conflict which might trigger the Thucydides's Trap. The way for the United States to avoid the trap is neither to gravitate toward confrontation nor adopt a passive accommodation. Rather, there should be a shift in United States grand strategy that suits the multipolar world.

Realist Interpretation of China's Rise and the Likelihood of a Trap

A realist interpretation of China's rise is even more gloomy for the future United States-China relationship. Offensive realists claim that it makes "good strategic sense for states to gain as much power as possible to ensure one's own survival."³⁰ Founder of offensive realism, John J. Mearsheimer writes, "fearful of other states, and knowing that

they operate in a self-help world, states quickly realize that the best way to survive is to be especially powerful.”³¹ Therefore, offensive realists argue that a rising power like China will not stop at simply achieving ‘balance of power’ with United States but turning that balance in its favor. This makes the case for the emergence of a trap in their bilateral relationship even more likely. More worryingly, leadership in Beijing have increasingly come to believe that destiny is on their side. After the recent rupture of democratic norms in the United States as well her embarrassing departure from Afghanistan and the growing desire among American people to reduce their country’s footprint in the world; Chinese leaders are increasingly looking at America as a declining power. Underestimation of America’s capacity as well as her desire to retaliate could inspire Beijing to formulate super ambitious foreign policies regarding Taiwan or the disputed waters of South China Sea or the East China Sea that could force the Americans to intervene militarily.

Various wargames drawn up by multiple studies in the United States opines that a violent confrontation between the U.S. and China could escalate from many sources of conflict like Taiwan, accidental collusion at sea, third party instigation, and trade which ultimately leads to one destination: a nuclear holocaust. The resurgence of China and its desire for irredentist overreach has put U.S. in a catch-22 situation. Maintain primacy or hegemony and it will only make Beijing more resentful towards America, fueling further Chinese revisionism in Asia. On the other hand, if the United States retreats from East Asia as a step towards abandoning hegemony, Beijing could interpret it as a sign of decline of American national power. Sensing weakness, China may next target the post-World War international order that has been carefully built by America and that has been so critical to preserving its national interests. Rewriting the rules of the current international world order to its benefit is an essential part for any aspiring hegemon and China has always held a grudge against the current one.

Critics of Thucydides’s Trap argue that war between America and China is unlikely, either due to Chinese civilizational belief of peaceful rise and co-existence or due to nuclear weapons that guarantees Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).³² There are also criticism that Thucydides Trap promotes iron law of inevitability of war between two competing nations.³³ Rather it’s the performance of leaders and dynamics of decision-making (acting in the interest of their citizens and aided by

insights from Thucydides's History), they say, that determines the path to an eventual war.³⁴

There are also arguments that these dynamics of decision-making that can impact China and the United States' foreign policy decisions which may trigger the Thucydides's Trap also leaves open the possibility of a United States-China war due to psychological misperceptions. These psychological misperceptions can be mitigated by rising powers giving sufficiently credible cooperative signals that should remove uncertainty about the riser's intentions in the mind of the declining state.³⁵

However, in real world situation, credible cooperative signals rarely fall so neatly as credible or cooperative to the declining states. In the run up to the First World War, repeated assurances by the Germans about its naval built-up failed to dissuade the fears of the British. From the prism of offensive realism, British act of counter-arming the Royal Navy is a predictable move to accumulate more power in order to preserve its security and primacy in the open seas.

Finally, there are the optimists who totally discard the possibilities of war by claiming that war between China and the United States is not a viable option for both countries in formulating policy toward each other. Factors like the huge gap of comprehensive power between China and the United States, the close economic ties and security cooperation between China and U.S. allies, the flourishing cultural and people-to-people exchanges among all related countries, and the changing public attitude toward war, will drive China and the United States to seek resolution to their disputes by peaceful means.³⁶

However, realist argument of relative gains does not make for such an optimistic assessment. States pursue relative gains over others which necessarily makes international relation a zero-sum game in which China's gain is inevitably a loss for America. At the more immediate future, the battle for relative gains will break out over cornering advantages in maritime domain, cyber spying or hacking, the shadow of A2 or AD and Air Sea Battle, and a closer strategic alignment between competing nations.³⁷ To that effect, changes are already happening on ground with China pursuing aggressive maritime policies, to which United States is responding by drawing up support from likeminded nations to uphold the freedom of seas (Quad and AUKUS). On the other hand, China is shoring up support in its own way by courting and coaxing Russia and other authoritarian nations by fanning illiberal policies at home and abroad. Beijing is also increasing its defense

spending to develop an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) plan that “entails missile, air, and sea forces capable of neutralizing U.S. bases as far away as Guam, and searching out and destroying U.S. naval battle groups in the region that might engage Chinese forces.”³⁸

Both sides will try to accumulate relative gains as much as possible under the logic of offensive realism to tilt the balance of power in their favor. Right now, the scale is tilted in favor of the United States. However, a question begets here. If China manages to narrow the gap in their respective national powers in future, then what will be the reaction and response of the American leadership and people at the slow death of their superior position in the world? Sparta had to face this dilemma 2500 years ago, so did the British twice in early part of 20th century and the Americans themselves for fifty long years in the previous century. In an analysis of the last 500 years, Graham Alison claims that out of the 16 cases of rising versus ruling power case, 12 has been settled by war. Statistics like that are quite unhelpful for optimists.

Balancing: An Appropriate Grand Strategy for America in a Multipolar World

Surely if America is forced to go into war with China to maintain its relative position in the 21st century, then the better way to do it is by deterring war itself by outgunning the revisionist challenges of China and successfully demonstrating her resolve to Beijing about defending the status quo by any means, including war. For this purpose, America must signal credible warnings to Beijing about where the red line exists without trying to henpeck China as is the case with the hegemonic grand strategy. If hegemony is no longer an appropriate instrument of grand strategy in the context of multipolarity, is there a better alternative that can send credible warnings to Beijing about American resolve?

Neorealists believe that grand strategies, among other things, result from systemic factors like distribution of power in the international system.³⁹ They say in the current multipolar world where new powers are rising, a hegemonic strategy will unnecessarily provoke rising powers. Christopher Layne and other influential realists like J. J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt propose ‘offshore balancing’ as an alternative grand strategy to hegemony, suitable for a multipolar world that will effectively counter China’s rise. Under offshore balancing,

America would offer support to alliances and allies—through diplomatic, military, and intelligence channels—to counterbalance China. In this way, it can shift burdens of security to other countries (buck passing).⁴⁰ Buck passing would reduce headlong confrontation between Washington and Beijing, as the former assumes the role of a buck passer and remains on the side-line, only to use local powers to contain its rival. Rather than maintaining an overwhelming power everywhere to check rival powers by itself, offshore balancing aims to preserve ruling power's strength and dominance by containing rising power with regional security architecture, created out of favorable regional allies or powers.⁴¹ Hence, rather than fear multipolarity, offshore balancing strategy embraces it. Offshore balancing accepts that the United States cannot stop the rise of new powers, either among American allies and Strategic partners (the EU, India, Japan, Indonesia) or outside it (China, Russia, Iran). At the same time, offshore balancing allows United States the right to protect and promote its interest by balancing Beijing with regional allies.

These arguments make a strong case for the adoption of an offshore balancing strategy by the United States to reduce risks with China that has the potential to insulate her from future great wars with Beijing and maximize her relative power position in the international system. Offshore balancing, in other words, has the potential to offset the Thucydides's Trap.

Limits of Retrenchment

The effectiveness of offshore balancing is determined by the ability as well as the intention and commitment of allies. Adoption of this strategy has to assume that American allies possess the capability to balance the economic and military bulwark of China. For some time now, India and Japan have been looked upon as effective regional powers to balance the rise of China in Asia. While some prefer India, others suggest that based on the patterns of behavior, potential military capability, and economic capacity, Japan instead of India could be more effective in the role of balancer in Asia.⁴² A weakness with this argument, however, is that Japan is neither geographically big nor its economy has the potential to reach the size of China. On top of that, Japan is an aging country. India, with its huge population and economic potential, alone can develop the power to match China and effectively balance her in Asia. But given the vast gap in their national power at present, it will take India a considerable amount of time to

reach to a point where it can effectively balance China on multiple domains.

Since, none of the American allies in Asia can offset China on their own in the immediate future, they are not likely to assume such a role without a strong backing from the United States. Left alone to balance China out in their backyard, therefore, American allies like India or Japan could fall into the temptation of strategic hedging. Therefore, a more effective counter-balance to China will rather be a regional bloc to contain her. Quad or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, an informal group of four democracies—the United States, India, Japan, and Australia—is seen increasingly as the regional body to fill that role in the Indo-Pacific Region.

However, questions abound on the effectiveness of Quad due to its vaguely defined objectives. The entry of AUKUS (acronym named after United States, United Kingdom and Australia who have come together to form a historic security pact in the Indo-Pacific) has led to polarization of opinion with some commentators clearly favoring it over Quad due to its unambiguous military nature. This brings us to the question: Is AUKUS a better balancer than Quad in a potential balancing strategy by the United States?

AUKUS's primary objective is to embolden the naval capabilities of Australia to check the increasing strength of the Chinese naval fleet in the Indo-Pacific. As such, it will let Australia build nuclear-powered submarines for the first time, using technology provided by the United States.⁴³ However, AUKUS is not a flexible body and therefore only military containment would define its role. Quad on the other hand, makes it easier for countries outside the group to cooperate with the Quad on one specific issue while ignoring another by being an informal-flexible body.⁴⁴ Thus, it allows not only the Quad countries themselves to select what they will work on together, but also keeps the door open for other like-minded countries to cooperate in issues of their choosing. This feature of Quad could make other countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, Singapore, France, Vietnam, and South Korea align more readily with the Quad or at least come close to its position on non-traditional security matters such as resilient supply chain, cyber issues, and the environment. Convergence of interests along these matters

between these prospective partners with some or all the Quad countries could potentially sway these countries to openly support Quad's security-related positions in future.⁴⁵

However, there are internal differences in the Quad which can blunt its effectiveness. India and the United States have conceptual difference as to their vision for the Indo-Pacific Region. Washington sees the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct of peace or tension, confrontation or conflict that requires a strategy to achieve a set of objectives to protect American interest in the region. Hence, an Indo-Pacific Strategy. For India, Indo-Pacific is not a strategy, but rather a geography within which India pursues several inclusive, cooperative and collaborative strategies, which are designed to promote regional growth, peace, prosperity and security.⁴⁶ By making her Indo-Pacific vision as a strategy, America looks at Indo-Pacific as a region of contestation which makes ASEAN countries weary of a future where they are forced to choose between the United States and China. ASEAN anxiety is well understood by New Delhi and therefore do not subscribe to the U.S vision. However, despite the difference in their Indo-Pacific construct, there are increasing evidences of strategic convergence in their constructs. For Quad to be a preferred balancer, Washington must sort out these internal differences to prevent confusing signals emanating from the group.

While Quad shows promise in its ability to deter China, what about its commitment to a long balancing act against Beijing? As noted previously, commitment of allies is as important as the ability of allies in offshore balancing strategy. However, if the United States acts as an offshore power, it would potentially put the full burden of balancing a rapidly rising China on the shoulders of its Quad partners which might jeopardize the credibility of Washington and its role as a security guarantor.⁴⁷ It would conceivably be difficult to persuade allies and partners that by withdrawing, the United States would credibly act as a balancer and have their back when things become dangerous.⁴⁸ At the same time, these states are also located far from one another, making it harder to form an effective balancing coalition.

So, it is unlikely that the buck passing strategy of offshore balancing will work against Beijing. For Quad to come on its own, the United States will have to coordinate the efforts of its members and may have to throw its considerable weight behind them. An expanded U.S. military commitment to the region is integral to preventing strategic

hedging by the Quad members. What the United States needs is to find a more restrained presence in Asia that allows her to retain an influential forward role that can become the basis for Quad's influence and deterrence in the region. Taking that into consideration, perhaps the most appropriate kind of balance will be onshore balancing which informs a "strategy of muscular activism", including forward military deployment to buttress U.S. military capabilities in the region as well as to seek the support of Quad partners and its regional allies.⁴⁹ Onshore balancing requires greater involvement beyond arms transfers and finance in the form of forward military presence and a basing network. Under that strategy, America can retrench/realign resources and commitments without opting for a total withdrawal from East Asia which is littered with the unintended consequences of allies hedging, or worst, band-wagoning with China.

While it is prudent for the United States not to abandon East Asia, but onshore balancing comes with a price. It is less likely to insulate the United States from Thucydides's Trap with China. But theorists advocating over-the-horizon capabilities will find onshore balancing's provision for Washington to retain a position of power-projection strength a highly valued payoff. Therefore, onshore balancing provides the United States a way out of the dangers emanating from an expanding security presence in East Asia as well from the unintended adverse consequences of a full withdrawal from the region.

Conclusion

Realism contends that whenever the world or part of it exhibits multipolarity, balance of power equation kicks in. Rise of China, Russia, India, and EU have brought back balance of power dynamics back into the global system and the United States needs an appropriate response to it. Quite clearly in a multipolar world, hegemonic grand strategy is untenable for America when the distribution of power has spread to so many poles. For Washington, it must make the distinction of friends and foes between these rising poles. There is now a bipartisan view in the United States about China and Russia being the challengers that Washington must manage. With that in mind, since the beginning of Donald Trump presidency, there has been a discernible sign that the United States is trying to bring back the idea of balance in its grand strategy. Trump presidency and now the Biden presidency have actively sought to build countervailing regional groups like QUAD and AUKUS to balance China in the Indo-Pacific Region.

The leadership role taken by Washington in the formation of these groups is a clear indication that the United States is beginning to respond appropriately to the dynamics of balance of power which has now been activated in the Indo-Pacific with the rise of China. Washington needs to further build on these initiatives by completely abandoning hegemony and adopting a grand strategy of balance with the intention of raising the defensive capabilities of its treaty allies and its strategic partners in Asia to counterbalance China. With a shift from hegemony to balance in its grand strategy, America can insulate herself from the drawback of its overarching shadow among other rising nations, which inevitably also insulates her from entering a Thucydides's Trap with China. At the same time, America would reserve the right to maintain a defensive posture of proportionate retaliation for any attempt to threaten her relative position in the world.

Endnotes

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