

ESSAY

Self-Betrayal: How the West Failed to Respond to China's Rise

Jonathan Holslag
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels
Jonathan.Holslag@vub.be @JonathanHolslag

From the 1980s, it was clear that a rising China would challenge the interests and core values of the United States and the European Union. Cables and intelligence reports that were recently disclosed reveal numerous warnings about a future Chinese authoritarian pushback. The Western political leadership, however, brushed them aside. While paying lip service to constructive engagement, it was business first. The downside of that policy became clear too. But it took several years for the Western political leadership to recognise it and shift to balancing. Early balancing efforts, though, again seem inconsistent.

Keywords: China; United States; Europe; balancing; constructive engagement

This essay reconstructs how Western countries held on to their inconsistent engagement with China, despite being aware of the risks and its failure, and how pledges to finally start balancing China yielded limited results. It is thus intended as a sobering assessment of over four decades of exchanges between the West and China. The main lesson learned is that, if the West is serious about checking the rise of another domineering Eurasian power, it needs to overcome its tendency towards self-betrayal and grandstanding, a discourse of balancing not backed by balancing in deeds.

Western handling of China's rise has attracted scrutiny. American officials acknowledged that the attempt to socialise China into Western values has failed (Campbell and Sullivan 2019; Fontaine and Ratner 2020; Campbell and Doshi 2021). Some attribute this to the limitations of the idea that commercial interaction would bring about liberalisation (Campbell and Ratner 2018, 60). Others highlighted that normative power just does not work. Reference has also been made to hubris, the fact that incumbent powers underestimate the challenges from a rising power (Mearsheimer 2019; Walt 2019): hence, the limited balancing. If the main actor in a unipolar order feels strong, why balance (Tunsjø 2018)? And if the United States (US) could be expected to balance China, this would be less the case for small European powers (Cladi and Locatelli 2012).

It remains relevant to consider Western countries together, in this case the US and the European Union (EU). They share a historical position of wealth and influence, which continues to be undermined by the shifting balance of power. They remain bound by treaties, the North Atlantic Treaty and the Maastricht Treaty, to collectively uphold certain values and interests. Even though the US has a larger military presence in China's vicinity, the long-term security repercussions of China's rise are not limited to the Western Pacific. Even if the US is a single large state and the EU a region, small states too could be negatively affected if a rising power is unchecked.

This article makes three contributions to the debate. First, it explicates the rationale for both the US and Europe to balance China. It analyses Western policy since the 1980s – from inconsistent engagement to inconsistent balancing – focusing on how China's power and ambitions were assessed and how decision makers made sense of their own policy. This

analysis is based on declassified intelligence assessments and writings of decision makers. The main conclusion here is not that Western decision makers were oblivious to the challenge of a rising China and the failure of their policy, but that they did not act upon it. It was self-betrayal rather than hubris.

It then evaluates balancing in two domains: economics and security. Since about fifteen years ago, Western countries came to appreciate the need for rebalancing bilateral relations with China and balancing China as a rising power. Yet, as much as decision makers had been papering over their failing engagement, the limitations of balancing attempts also became clear. Yet again, without much effort to change course, Western countries aimed to rebalance trade and to respond to Chinese initiatives such as the Belt and Road, but without success. In the realm of defence, the US vowed to strengthen its capabilities in the Pacific. However, even after a decade of so-called pivoting to Asia, little changes were made on the ground. Hence, this essay goes beyond the idea that Western countries, given their ‘unipolar moment’, were too confident and unaware of the challenge, that there was hubris or excessive confidence in the strength of the West and the appeal of Western values. There was a lot of awareness, but no will to act upon it.

The rationale for balancing

Balancing has a negative connotation and is often considered a precursor of war. Yet, the purpose of balancing is to prevent countries from becoming so powerful that they could easily resort to violence to advance their interests – and to prevent that violence becomes the last resort to stop them. Balance of power is to International Relations what checks and balances are to domestic politics: preventing tyranny and violence from becoming the only option to overcome it. Balancing is about preventing war. Like in domestic politics, a debate exists about whether strong countries can be made virtuous. Yet, as Niccolò Machiavelli (2001) concluded, spreading power is a better check against vice than trying to make the powerful virtuous (42).

It is often argued that China does not necessarily intend to dominate. Its strategic culture, for instance, is said to be more continental, defensive and inward-looking. Yet, intentions and even strategic cultures change. Several Chinese dynasties have moved from defence to offence (Holslag 2019). Growing power often leads to growing ambitions – and arrogance. This is especially the case when the shift in the balance of power is so decisive that the rising country is no longer ‘checked’ by others.

No country disturbs the balance of power more than China. In the last 30 years, China eclipsed all other Asian powers. It represents 47 per cent of Asia’s gross domestic product, 51 per cent of its official military spending and 57 per cent of its manufacturing value-added (World Bank 2021). Even in the history of Asian politics, the balance of power seldom tilted so decisively in China’s favour (Maddison 2008).¹ To be sure, China has several internal problems. But its fragility is relative. Just compare China with India, the other potential Asian juggernaut, Japan, the stagnant regional power, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the loose grouping of Southeast Asian countries, and it becomes clear that Chinese fragility is not necessarily more debilitating than elsewhere.

¹ The estimations by Angus Maddison, for instance, show that China represented about 36 per cent of Asia’s wealth around 1700, 44 per cent in 1600 and 38 per cent in 1500.

If regional dominance is achieved, this makes it more likely for China to alter the balance of power on a larger scale. Let us consider Eurasia as a whole. China represents 27 per cent of Eurasia's GDP, 29 per cent of its military spending, and 39 per cent of its manufacturing value-added. Once more, this power advantage cannot be underestimated from a historical perspective. When the Soviet Union (USSR) emerged from World War II as one of the two main victors, its share in Eurasia's total GDP was below 10 per cent. The two most recent manifestations of German empire – Bismarck's and the Third Reich – represented around 5 per cent of Eurasian GDP; Napoleonic France below 6 per cent (Maddison 2008). These are rough comparisons, but they show China's advantageous position and that the change has important consequences for the European lesser powers on the Western end of Eurasia.

A major power towering above Eurasia has been a geopolitical nightmare, but balancing against it has never been straightforward. Lesser powers in the shadow of an emerging great power are often slow to form balancing coalitions. Maritime powers, such as the US and the United Kingdom (UK), tended towards restraint or isolationism when they faced a major adversary. But despite hesitance, the leading maritime powers, joined by many lesser powers, did balance whenever a Eurasian leviathan stood up. The last examples were the USSR and Germany. Once again, China's position is comparatively strong.

China's ascent manifested in such a manner that dominance cannot be excluded and that balancing becomes imperative. This remains so when considering intermediating factors identified with the balance of threat (Walt 1987). Take, for example, geographic proximity. Many neighbouring powers face the military consequences of China's growth. Long-range weapons and expanded channels of communication diminish the stopping power of oceans and mountains. Take offensive military capabilities. Whereas advanced missile systems deployed by China are considered a defensive means to deter adversaries, these weapons are offensive from the viewpoint of others and extend China's combat range. New cyber and space-based assets can be used in both ways (Rajagopalan, 2019). Intentions that China considers legitimate, like the reunification with Taiwan and the recovery of allegedly lost territory, are a threat to others.

Balancing is the prevention of domination by another state. Balancing is inevitably proactive. If a state attains dominance, it becomes more difficult to rebalance it. A difference is often made between internal balancing, that is, the increase of one's own capabilities, and external balancing, which is the empowerment of security partners to dilute the power of the rising state (Waltz 1979, 118). Scholars also distinguish between different degrees of confrontation (Table 1). Hard balancing is oriented towards containment and implies the recognition of the rising state as a security threat (Levy 2004, 37; Paul 2005). Soft balancing is identified with diplomatic, informal and economic initiatives to hold rising states in check (Ibid.; Kelley 2005; Brooks and Wohlforth 2005).

External balancing sometimes comes with a notion of hard, exclusive institutional balancing versus soft, inclusive institutional balancing (Kai 2008). This concerns the degree to which the rising power is accepted into international organisations and globalisation is maintained (Tellis 2014). Internal balancing, too, has been discussed in various forms. Internal economic balancing, for example, can be hard and protectionist, but also soft, including measures like limiting foreign investment from the rising state without severing the overall partnership (Brawley 2004, 84; Lenihan 2018, 42). Internal balancing can coincide with confrontational

or reassuring signals to the rising state, the latter being important to prevent tensions from escalating (Rajagopalan 2020).

	Internal	External
Hard	Shoring up the capacity to win wars against the rising state and to preserve key industries, confrontational signalling, severing cooperation, arms race	Building military alliances against the rising state, policies of exclusion in international organisations, containment, exclusion, confrontational signalling
	Indirect competition, military modernisation, economic innovation, rebalancing cooperation, avoids confrontational signalling	Open partnerships with alternative countries, alliances inside international organisations, inclusion, avoids confrontational signalling
Soft		

Table 1. Types of balancing

The differentiation between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ provides no measurement of effectiveness. In an early stage of the rising power’s ascent, soft balancing can be effective in preventing domination by addressing unbalanced trade, limiting the transfer of sensitive technology and empowering partners. Such a response dilutes the power of the rising state. It does not aim to stop its growth, but enables states to grow together. Such kind of balancing achieves its aim, that is, preventing dominance, without the cost of an arms race and interrupted trade. But the need for early soft balancing is not evident. As stressed by many scholars, the nature of power shifts is often such that they evince themselves slowly, in a diffuse way, and it takes time for status-quo powers to realise the long-term risks (Morgenthau 1962; Mearsheimer 1988, 148). Hubris and complacency stand in the way (Gilpin 2000; Layne 2018). The effects of a power shift might also be downplayed because of commercial interests, interest groups, weak leadership and internal fragmentation (Schweller 2006). The consequent behaviour is referred to as “under-balancing” (Ibid.). So, the US and European lesser powers both have an interest in balancing China. But, and this will become evident in the following section, this does not mean that they have also recognised this challenge and acted accordingly.

Inconsistent engagement

The West opened to China, not the other way around. It was the West that made overtures in the 1970s (Goh 2005; Tudda 2012). At the time of that diplomatic revolution, the idea was not to balance *against* China, but to balance *with* China against the Soviet Union (DNI 1970; UKFCO 1974). Yet, experts and intelligence reports warned that a partnership would not be evident. Distrust of the West ran deep (Fairbank 1972; DNI 1970). China was fixated with power and ultimately aspired to replace the US (CIA 1975a, 10; DNI 1976, 7). The quest for control over Hong Kong, Taiwan and adjacent seas would not disappear (CIA 1975b). In the 1980s, intelligence services found that China assertively forced foreign companies into joint ventures and that the goal of reform was to gain power (UKFCO 1980).

They warned that economic modernisation would be followed by military modernisation, accommodation would be limited, competition more assertive, and that Beijing would be capable of “play[ing] foreign companies against one another” (DNI 1986, 6 and 17).

Assertiveness became confrontational on two occasions. A first episode concerned the negotiations between the UK and China over the return of Hong Kong. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was prepared to lecture China on democracy and capitalism, was taken aback when Deng Xiaoping reprimanded her that he could easily take Hong Kong by force, to which she responded: “There is nothing I could do to stop you” (Thatcher 1993, 260; Chi-kwan 2015). Despite this assertion of Chinese power and resolve, the UK and other Western countries considered the growth potential of China primarily as a business opportunity. “There is still the opportunity for us to secure valuable contract,” the Foreign Secretary stated (UKFCO 1982). Statesmen like George H. W. Bush and François Mitterrand were mesmerised by the country (Mitterrand 1961; Engel 2008). Both wrote about China as a civilisational power and natural partnership.

A new confrontation with China’s aspirations and growing power came with the Tiananmen Crisis of 1989. The response was ambivalent. President Bush warned against a Middle Kingdom Syndrome, yet insisted the genie of democratisation could not be put back in the bottle (Bush 1989). Bush himself was aware of that contradiction, as he called it, but instructed his administration to mend fences. Still, China was reluctant: “The US has impugned Chinese interests”, Deng Xiaoping answered. Preserving the personal friendship with George H. W. Bush was fine, but no reform would ever affect the primacy of the Party and its key interests (Declassified Memorandum of Conversation 1998). The National Security Council warned: “We may not have seen the worst”. (Paal 1989). The State Department saw “profound disagreements” (Department of State 1989). Cooperation was prioritised nevertheless. President Bush wrote to the Chinese leadership that criticism about the Tiananmen crackdown was due to the nature of television and that he hoped that it still felt “that economic contacts with the West are good” (First Letter of George H. W. Bush 1989).

What followed was often labelled as constructive engagement: an effort to make China use its power wisely. This persisted throughout the 1990s (Major 1991; Nesshöver 1999). The Clinton Administration stressed that America’s economic strength gave it a position of advantage and that China had to be helped to develop and to contribute to regional security (White House 1996, 40). The EU echoed this (EC 1995, 3). Declassified documents show a wide range of concerns, ranging from China’s refusal to stop supporting countries with nuclear technology, increasing pressure on Taiwan and limited economic reforms (NSC 1993). Intelligence services warned – literally – that the “betrayal” of constructive engagement, that is, the decoupling of trade and political reform, could lead to more intransigence, nationalism and assertiveness (DCI 1995). Concerns about China’s future intentions were magnified during the Taiwan Missile Crisis in 1995-96. President Clinton himself hesitated, stating that he “hated” American China policy for the lack of reciprocity and the failure to work with China towards more balanced trade (Gellman 1998; Clinton 2005).

In 1996, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) stated that while China would lay low for a while, it saw the United States “as the main obstacle preventing Beijing from reassuming its historical place as the paramount power in Asia” (Gannon 1996). The American Quadrennial Defense Review of 1997 identified China as a regional great power that could emerge as a

global peer competitor beyond 2015. Yet, the document expected other regional powers to balance China's rise vigorously (DOD 1997, 13). The first Annual Report to Congress on the Military Power of China, issued in 2000, concluded: "China wants to become the preeminent Asian power by generating enough strength so that no major action will be taken by any other international actor in Asia without first considering Chinese interests" (DOD 2000, 2). Clinton's Secretaries of State voiced scepticism about eight years of constructive engagement. Madeleine Albright (2013, 433) characterised China as "too big to ignore, too repressive to embrace, difficult to influence, and very, very proud". Warren Christopher (2001, 236 and 248) expressed his cynicism about the way the policy was led by narrow corporate interests. The limitations of engagement had become undeniable.

Still, President George W. Bush decided to go on with it and drop his election narrative of China as a strategic competitor. Likewise, European institutions continued to assert that there was a need to help China join the international community (EC 2001). Along the way, however, the tension between constructive engagement and the realisation that China only superficially bought into it, was again brought into the open. A communication by the European Commission in 2006 stressed that China had to become more responsible, echoing the US line of the 'responsible stakeholder' (EC 2006). The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review warned that China could upset the Asian balance of power and that a scenario of Chinese hegemony had to be pre-empted. "Of the major and emerging powers, China has the greatest potential to compete with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset U.S. military advantages" (DOD 2006a, 29). The Defense Department highlighted the uncertainty surrounding China's future (DOD 2006b, 7).

Europe and the United States once more continued constructive engagement. And again, key officials looked back at it with scepticism. "We were fooling ourselves if we believed the Chinese were [a] 'strategic partner'", former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (2011, 311) wrote, referring to China's demand for apologies in exchange for releasing the crew of a US patrol aircraft after a collision with a Chinese fighter jet in 2001, "[But] there were significant economic interests in maintaining good relations with the PRC by offering an apology and moving on" (314). "Beijing rarely reciprocated," Condoleezza Rice (2011, 606) wrote: "They listened but probably ignored us when we said that it would be good for them to have a liberalization of politics too". In 2008, an internal review by EU institutions of the various dialogues with China showed that the approach of constructive engagement had yielded only limited results.²

Another decade of inconsistent engagement showed its limitations – and governments being aware of it. Yet, consumed by the economic crisis of 2009, the focus of newly elected President Barack Obama and the European Commission remained on cooperation with China. A US Deputy Secretary of State spoke of a "compelling need to work with China", to invest in dialogue and to welcome China's arrival as a prosperous power (Steinberg 2009). In 2009, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton called for a positive and cooperative relationship and stated that human rights issues must not interfere with matters such as the economy and security (Solomon 2009). Another official put it more minimalistically: "We're not looking for them to lead or change course, we're looking for them to not be obstructionist" (Cooper

² The author was able to have access to that assessment. The document, however, cannot be disclosed.

2009). On the other side of the Atlantic, in the wake of the Eurozone crisis, European countries scrambled to China to attract investors.

Inconsistent balancing

Following a disappointing state visit by President Obama, a lack of progress in the talks about the Iranian nuclear programme and new signals of Chinese assertiveness, policy changed (Campbell 2010). “Did you guys give away too much?”, the President asked his collaborators (Landler 2012). This led to the so-called rebalance to Asia. It implied a continuation of engagement accompanied with soft balancing: strengthening alternative economic and security partnerships, defending industries against unfair competition and modernising military capabilities to check China’s military might (Campbell 2013; Clinton 2014, 79; Campbell 2016). In Susan Rice’s (2019, 434) words, “The objective of these combined efforts was to advance U.S. interests and check China’s expanding role in Asia”. Soft balancing had thus an external component: strengthening security and military partnerships. Trade relations, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), were decisive and seen as a way to diversify economic relations away from China. It also had an internal component: Europe and the US took a greater interest in shoring up their industry and technology to compete (EC 2010; Obama 2015).

As soon as the rebalance thinking formalised, a new US national security advisor re-prioritised the engagement part of it and promoted initiatives for the President to invest in a close relationship with the new generation of Chinese leaders. The emphasis shifted from checking China’s role to engaging China on a series of specific challenges. Secretary of State John Kerry (2018) saw China largely as an inevitable partner on Iran, North Korea and climate change. “The first step was finding a way to cooperate with China”, he summarised, “China and the US could embark on a special journey together” (559 and 562). Secretary of Defence Bob Gates (2014, 527) lamented that China showcasing a new fighter jet during a visit was “about as big a ‘fuck you’ as you can get”, but added that the American political leadership did not want to recognise it.

His successor Leon Panetta (2014) considered it essential to approach China through the lens of common security challenges like North Korea and Iran. He and his own successor, Chuck Hagel, searched for ways to deepen cooperation. Security Advisor Susan Rice (2019, 437-8) prioritised cyber theft. She echoed China’s interest in a new type of great power relations and stated that major global challenges cannot be addressed without the US and China working together. One dissident voice was Ash Carter (2019, 280): “Washington has often backed down in the face of Chinese bullying,” he wrote, “From aggressive territorial claims to human rights abuses and brazen theft on a trillion-dollar scale, China has violated core international norms time and again with few repercussions.” He spoke of a failure to develop a coherent policy.

President Donald Trump appeared to move from a fixation with soft external balancing, empowering China’s neighbours while keeping the dialogue open, towards hard internal balancing. This was expressed through slogans such as “Make America Great Again”, a focus on industrial policy and trade protectionism, as well as an emphasis on countering China as a military adversary. The 2017 National Security Strategy identified China as a revisionist power (White House 2017, 25). The Trump Administration buried the hope for

constructive engagement and coaxing China into liberal values. “We must take China as it is”, Vice-President Mike Pence remarked, “not as we imagine or hope it might be someday” (ibid.). Officials in both the Republican and Democratic camp now acknowledged that instead of constructive engagement, the US had often pursued opportunistic engagement. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (2019) stated: “When it came right down to it, it was always about the money”.

The failure of the past policy was now recognised, but policy remained inconsistent. Economic balancing efforts showed inconsistency between the attempt to limit China’s export advantage, to keep strategic companies like Huawei in check and to curb the transfer of Western technology on the one hand; and Trump’s pursuit of business deals to bring home Chinese commitments to buy American oil and agricultural goods. The approach was also inconsistent because Washington lost credibility among European partners. They tended to stick to an inconsistent mixture of engagement and soft balancing, the latter entailing more attention to domestic industrial capacity and fostering alternative partnerships in Asia.

Economic balancing

Since the 1980s, Western countries understood China’s power potential and ambitions. The Hong Kong handover and the Tiananmen uprising made it clear that China was not inclined to amass power with an eye to embracing Western values. There was limited hope for changing China’s political system and influencing its interests. Different factors explain the continuation of constructive engagement. Some Western leaders took a personal interest in good relations with China, others took their ideals for reality. Despite awareness of the power potential, there was no imminent threat and no reason, hence, to prevent Western companies from transferring technology and wealth to China. Even when constructive engagement failed and China became Asia’s biggest economy, Western countries held on to it. When a shift towards balancing was finally announced, policies remained inconsistent.

Given the inconsistency of balancing policies, one could ask why it is relevant to evaluate their success. Still, to properly understand ineffective Western balancing, one must consider changes in the domain of economic and defence policy. This section and the next identify specific benchmarks for balancing, starting with economic balancing.

One way to balance economically is to limit external demand or export opportunities as a source of growth for the rising country. This is particularly relevant in the case of China, because it has a tradition of ‘sterilising’ its export revenues, meaning that they are converted into politically-guided investments abroad (Prasad and Wei 2005). In this regard, there was a shift from diplomatic pressure through dialogue to Trumpian protectionist hard balancing. A second component of internal economic balancing is to ramp up productivity by accelerating technology growth and constraining technology transfers. The latter would be a manifestation of hard balancing; the former of soft balancing. A third element concerns industrial policy. While services have become more prominent, manufacturing remains vital and has an impact on supply chains more broadly, as the Covid-19 crisis also showed. Balancing would certainly entail an attempt to preserve market share in manufacturing. The hard variant could include efforts to damage Chinese industries while strengthening key industries at home. In terms of external economic balancing, the most obvious goal would be to diversify trade and investment away from China to other countries so that they emerge

as counterweights. This would also involve an effort to enhance physical connectivity, through ports etc.

Let us start with the trade deficit, particularly important because state capitalism converts part of it into strategic investments abroad and loans that have shaped the Belt and Road Initiative. The trade deficit with China has been on the agenda since the 1990s. It sparked discussions about the alleged undervaluation of the Chinese currency, export credits and subsidies. The overall idea has been that a trade deficit should not be a problem unless it is sustained, large and the consequence of political intervention rather than market advantage. For about two decades, the idea was to address the issue through dialogue. The result, however, is disappointing. Between the 1990s and 2019, the trade deficit of the United States grew from USD 27 billion to USD 366 billion and that of the EU from USD 18 billion to USD 220 billion (UN 2021). Even the attempts by the Trump administration to reduce the deficit through protectionism had a limited effect.

The lack of respect for international property rights, forced technology transfers and enduring technology nationalism formed another cluster of concerns. Western R&D spending as a share of GDP remained constant (Wold Bank 2020). Attempts to increase the spending share had modest success. Compared with China, the output of triadic patents declined by over 30 per cent in both the EU and the US since 2006, while China's output steadily grew. It is impossible to assess the success of the West to limit forced technology transfers, but the value of the transfer of R&D-related intellectual property increased spectacularly between 2006 and 2019: from USD 661 million to USD 3.7 billion in the case of the US (UNCTAD 2021). For Europe, the evidence is more fragmentary, but the trend is upwards as well. In 2018 alone, Germany sold USD 3 billion worth of R&D-related intellectual property to China.

This coincided with a spectacular growth of China's share in global exports of high-tech goods. In recent years, China represented about one quarter of the global exports of high-tech products, about the same as the US and Europe combined. These exports are partially produced by foreign-invested companies in China, and there is no indication that foreign companies have come to see China's industrial rise as a reason to put a brake on their investment. At the same time, there is no evidence of success in Western attempts to encourage investment in domestic industries. The stock of fixed assets at current replacement cost in manufacturing, an indicator of investment, has not grown faster in the United States and large European economies, such as Germany, France, the UK and Italy.³

Figure 1. China's, ASEAN's and India's share in US and EU Asian imports (percentage)
Source: UNCTAD STATS.

³ Data from Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) and Eurostat for 1995-2019. No consistent aggregated EU data are available.

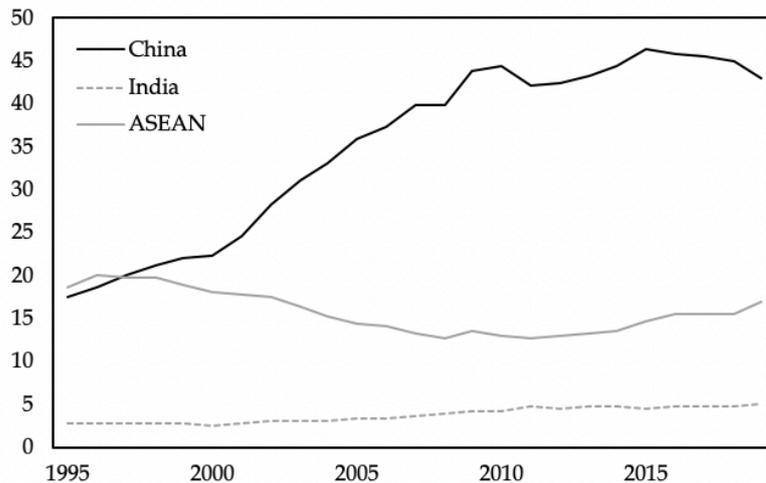


Chart. Share of China, ASEAN, and India in US and EU Asian imports (%). Source: UNCTAD STATS.

Figure 2. Share in US and EU FDI stock in Asia, by country (percentage)
Sources: BEA and Eurostat.

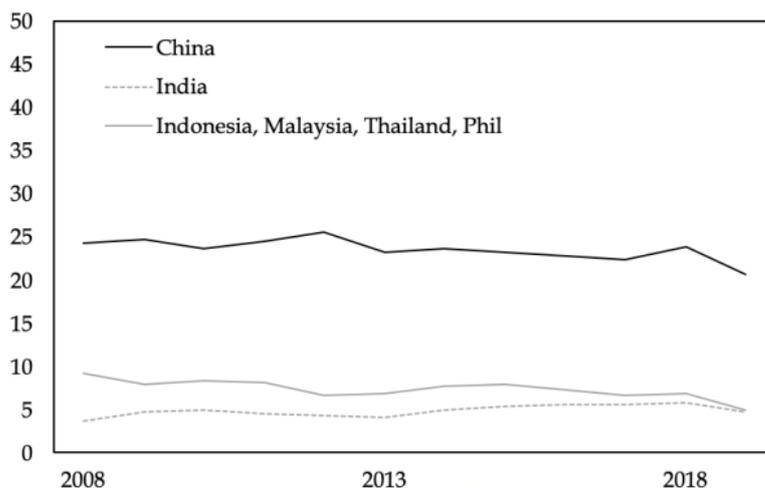


Chart. Share of countries in US and EU FDI stock in Asia (%). Source: BEA and Eurostat.

Attempts to diversify trade and investment relations were either dead-ended or without effect. The European Union considered trade agreements with Asian countries as a form of soft balancing. Yet, European negotiations with the two main alternative markets, ASEAN and India, failed. Negotiations with Indonesia commenced in 2016, without result. A trade agreement with South Korea did not have an impact on the country's share in Europe's imports from Asia.⁴ The agreements with Japan, Vietnam and Singapore are too recent to evaluate. The impact of US initiatives was also modest. In 2001, Washington initiated the Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative, a supposed prologue to trade agreements. It fell flat. In 2003, the US suggested turning the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum into a trade zone. This was also aborted. Trade agreements with Singapore and Australia had no

⁴ The share of the Republic of Korea (ROK) exports in EU Asian imports remained flat at around 4.9 per cent after 2015.

effect on the regional distribution of imports. The Obama administration concluded a free trade agreement with South Korea. Yet, its share in US imports from Asia did not increase either.⁵ The Obama administration conducted negotiations for the TPP, only to be abandoned by the Trump administration.

China became and remained the main trade partner for the West in Asia. The share of China in Europe's and US Asian imports grew from 17 per cent in the 1990s to 46 per cent in 2015. Then, it slightly decreased: to 43 per cent in 2019. But a part of this decrease was offset by re-exporting Chinese goods through countries like Vietnam (Ngoc Chau and Boudreau 2019). The share of India, for instance, never exceeded 5 per cent. The share of ASEAN decreased from around 19 per cent in the 1990s to 13 per cent in the following decade (Figure 1). Between 2008 and 2018, the share of China in the total investment stock of the US and the EU in Asia remained stable at around 24 per cent. The share of India increased modestly from 4 to 6 per cent; the share of Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia decreased (Figure 2).⁶ It is striking that despite various pledges and action plans, the reorientation of trade and investment remained so disappointing. This allowed China to seize the initiative.

Let us turn to connectivity. The Belt and Road Initiative became China's flagship project in the realm of trade and investment. In 2018, the EU launched its Connecting Europe and Asia policy, another soft balancing attempt. By 2019, the European Investment Bank had lent USD 2.7 billion for Asian infrastructure projects, mainly in India (EIB 2019, 3-5). Only in the 2019 Indo-Pacific Economic Vision did the US government recommend the International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC) to invest more in Asian infrastructure. By 2020, its commitments to the Indo-Pacific totalled USD 5.4 billion. European and American efforts paled in comparison with the tens of billions of Chinese loans for Asian connectivity projects (Dollar 2020). Whereas, since 2006, China built over 600 kilometres of railways and developed four ports in Asia, no such projects were supported by the West.

Economic power is fundamental for any other manifestation of state power. It is often said that it is neither possible nor desirable to try to stop China's growth. Yet, in an effort to balance a rising power that pursues growth through a system of state capitalism, it would be important, at the very least, to rebalance trade, bilaterally and between China and other Asian countries. Moreover, the growth of another rising power would be less of a challenge if incumbents' productivity, innovation and position in core sectors like high-tech and manufacturing more broadly are preserved. In most of these domains, the West declared its wish to adjust, signed off on action plans and agreements, but with very little or no impact.

Military balancing

Economic growth is usually followed by growing military capabilities. It was clear already in the 1980s that China would be no exception. Deng's allusion to military power regarding Hong Kong, the Taiwan missile crisis, the collision between a Chinese fighter aircraft and a US maritime patrol aircraft, and the growing military presence beyond China's immediate

⁵ The share of ROK in US Asian imports remained flat at around 7,5 percent.

⁶ Consistent data do not exist for EU foreign direct investment (FDI) in ASEAN as a whole. ASEAN's share in US FDI in Asia decreased from 9 per cent in 2009 to 7 per cent in 2019 (source: BEA and Eurostat).

neighbourhood confirmed that growing power would lead to growing military assertiveness. By 2018, China represented over half of Asia's official defence spending, leaving the US as the only decisive balancer. Large European countries such as France and the UK affirmed their interest in Asian security, but have few assets in the region, and their occasional deployments remained symbolic.

One important metric of internal balancing is the defence budget. In the last 20 years, the US defence budget, adjusted for inflation, remained larger than during the final decade of the Cold War. Yet, when the non-base funds for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are deducted, the base budget is only about as large as at the end of the Cold War. Despite concerns about China's rise, the base budget decreased between 2007 and 2018, followed by a hike in 2019 (Woodward 2019, 3). As a first rough metric, the budget thus does not hint at a strong internal balancing effort.

Let us turn our attention to the US forward presence in the Pacific. Forward military presence matters. As a form of internal balancing, it shows resolve, reassures allies, enhances knowledge of the theatre, permits to respond rapidly and, eventually, to secure staging points in case of a major war. Attention also goes to the US capacity to overcome the overstretch that resulted from its deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Table 2. The US military rebalance to the Asia-Pacific

Note: the years between 2000 and 2010 are omitted for the sake of parsimony.

Sources: IISS, USDOD.

	1990	2000	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Troops	96.070	80.630	61.682	70.181	69.950	84.710	84.660	84.660	82.430	76.220
Aircraft carriers	8	7	4	5	6	5	5	5	5	5
Surface combatants	86	56	46	47	56	55	46	48	51	57
Submarines	43	30	31	33	30	33	33	31	31	32
Combat aircraft	191	178	148	136	136	158	144	150	150	150
Key systems				P-8		AN/TPY2		THAAD (Guam)		
								MC130J		
								F-15C		
										F-22
										F-35

The number of US troops deployed in the Asia-Pacific region has never recovered from the decline after the Cold War. Between 1990 and 2010, the amount of forward-deployed troops decreased dramatically from 96,070 to 61,682. During this period, the US became increasingly aware of China's growing military power, but prioritised theatres such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The inventory of important platforms, such as aircraft carriers, surface combatants and combat aircraft, also shrank significantly. The problem of attrition within the Command in the Pacific Command became manifest, but senior officials reassured that China still lagged behind. President Barack Obama trivialised the problem: "You mention the Navy, for example, and the fact that we have fewer ships than we did in 1916. Well, we also have fewer horses and bayonets" (Zengler 2012). Still, the military continued to search for ways to respond to China's military modernisation. In 2010, the Navy and Air Force issued their AirSea Battle concept, alongside concepts such as Offshore Control and Joint Operational Access. It involved enhanced missile defence, long-range strikes, underwater platforms and electronic warfare capabilities to preserve access to China's neighbourhood.

The change in doctrine was hardly matched by changes on the ground, as Table 2 shows. The military, however, continued to issue bolder doctrines. In 2014, it published a joint vision for entry operations. Building on the AirSea Battle, it offered a vision for operations inside the contested Chinese neighbourhood (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2014, 2). This vision was issued at the same time as another concept: the Third Offset Strategy, an attempt to find creative technologies in times of limited resources (Hagel 2014). Yet, attrition and a lack of training continued to plague the Pacific Command (Miller *et al.* 2019; Geurts and Rudder 2019, 26). "If we cannot get peacetime navigation", said the Seventh Fleet Commander, "we will face real risk when we enter the fog of war" (Faturechi *et al.* 2019). The Navy stated that the rise of China and Russia required at least 66 attack submarines and to be able to deploy 34 ships. About eight submarines were forward deployed (Haney 2013). The Pacific Command Commander spoke of an overall erosion in his forces' operational readiness: "We are at risk of overstressing the force" (Harris 2017).

Between 2017 and 2020, navy sailors were deployed longer in their forward bases, so that troop levels increased to 90,400. In terms of platforms, about 30 additional F-35, F-22 and advanced F-18 were made available, alongside two MQ-4C Triton UAV. Still, in 2019, the Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) had half of the submarines required, lacked ammunition and experienced flaws in the ability to resupply. Shortfalls remained in long-range anti-ship missiles, land-attack cruise missiles and torpedoes. "The high operational demands, delayed maintenance, training pipeline shortfalls, and shortage of ready surge forces limit US INDOPACOM's responsiveness" (Davidson 2019, 19). Davidson also stated that the command had only one quarter of the required intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities (Davidson 2018). In 2018, sailors kept reporting that ship workload was not decreasing (GAO 2018).

So far, hence, despite pledges and new concepts seeking to respond to the altering balance of power, military rebalancing remained modest. It is not clear whether new commitments for increased defence spending will change this. In recent years, the Navy could still satisfy only about half of the theatre commanders' requests for ships (Richardson 2018). When the US faced the USSR as a peer rival, it deployed around 500 ships, compared to around 270 in the last years. The Navy's 30-year shipbuilding programme will increase force levels for surface combatants, but not halt the decline in the inventory of aircraft carriers and submarines in the next ten years (Navy Force Structure 2020). Questions about the financial

feasibility of 355 manned ships and doubts about the outlook for the 145 unmanned ships to be deployed by 2035 remain (GAO 2019a; GAO 2019b, 137).

Any contingency plan to defend parts of the ‘first island chain’ or to retake them after being invaded by China would require putting boots on the ground. Aggression can be slowed down by air and sea dominance. Yet, in the end, it remains indispensable to have forces on the ground (Hosek *et al.* 2018). An important effort to deploy in the warzone, to defend or retake territory near China, concerns the Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment concept. It is about marines regaining sea control. Every ship is potentially a warship (US Marine Corps and US Navy 2017). In this regard, attention is paid to the so-called ‘upgunning’ of amphibious ships, equipping them with anti-ship missiles and deploying these ships in combination with destroyers (Eckstein 2019). A policy of enhancing the platforms still requires sufficient platforms. As it stands, the number of amphibious warfare ships is set to reach 38 in 2034: 26 below the level of the Cold War. Breaking into a contested environment also requires vast mine countermeasure capabilities, but these will remain limited.

These difficulties were noticed by US security partners. Beyond difficult relations under the Trump administration, questions are asked about the US’ reliability as a check against China’s rise and the feasibility for small Asian countries to join a rigid balancing coalition. South Korea continues to consider the US a vital security partner, but weighs its security concerns against the economic appeal of China and expresses fear that the US simply cannot defend it against a formidable power such as China (Park 2015; The Genron NPO 2019; Cha 2019). One official stated: “China is not North-Korea.”⁷ Or: “People have some doubt that Washington will really protect Seoul or Tokyo at the expense of Washington or Seattle or New York” (Padden 2017). It prioritises autonomy and pursues hedging. While military cooperation with Japan has become more comprehensive and continues to harbour distrust of China, Japan remains hesitant about both the feasibility and desirability of harder balancing (Liff 2019, 453-91; Deguchi 2020).

In Southeast Asia, military cooperation was strengthened with Vietnam, yet eroded with the Philippines, while most countries in the region see China’s rise as inevitable. As one observer states: “The reality is that the United States did not do enough in terms of stopping China’s land reclamation and occupation or militarization of the South China Sea artificial islands” (Jennings 2019; Septiari 2019). Hedging remains the dominant posture in the region. Even India, despite its troubles with China on the border, still prefers strategic autonomy to solid security partnerships against China. An Indian opinion maker stated: “[America’s] approach has done nothing to curb China’s territorial revisionism” (Chellaney 2019; see also Rajagopalan 2020, 75-93).

This reluctance to join a balancing coalition, and the related tendency towards hedging, has consequences. First, it highlights a degree of acceptance that China’s rise as a military superpower is inevitable, that the price of resisting is already too high and that the US is not reliable enough to take greater risks in countering China. Second, it leads to a situation where Asian countries continue to prioritise economic exchange, often in an unbalanced way such that China especially benefits from access to their markets and reaps larger gains. Third, Asian countries too risk to fall into the trap of grandstanding, preferring an insufficient defence partnership with the US, based on limited and largely symbolic military signalling,

⁷ Conversation with senior South-Korean official, Brussels, 2 June 2015.

to effectively halting China's military rise and making greater financial sacrifices to modernise their capabilities. In the last 20 years, for example, the average military spending as a share of GDP of Chinese neighbours has dropped from 2.1 to 1.8 per cent, which is below China's (SIPRI 2020).

Conclusion

Even if China holds much greater potential to achieve Eurasian dominance and challenge the incumbent power, there have been few coherent counter-movements in the Western world. A review of how Western policy makers interpreted China's rise reveals that, while the challenges and limitations of constructive engagement were clear, Western countries preferred to persist with inconsistent engagement: paying lip service to the need to help China embrace Western values, while doing nothing to enforce it, and refusing to sever relations even when the failure of such engagement became undeniable. In the last decade, there has been a tendency in the US towards soft and later hard balancing, but Washington failed to enlist the support of Europe and did not match its words with deeds. In fact, the West fell short in balancing both economically and militarily.

This essay does not make predictions about whether the growing power and assertiveness of China will finally prompt more vigorous balancing in the future. It does, however, highlight the risks of inaction. A first risk concerns grandstanding: bold policies not matched by changes in trade, military capabilities and so forth. A second risk concerns engagement without benchmarking and feedback loops. The West has engaged China in numerous dialogues for decades. Yet, there has been no consistent evaluation of these dialogues; and even when there was an evaluation, no policy changes followed. A third risk is to continue to reduce the debate about the rise of China to tactical or practical challenges, and to restrict it to highly specialised discussions, whereas the most important dilemma hardly receives attention: namely, that China has far greater potential for dominance and thus to compromise the security, interests and way of life of other countries – and that Beijing, so far, has not reassured the rest of the world that it will use its power with more virtue and compassion.

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Notes on Contributor

Jonathan Holslag teaches International Politics at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium.

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