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Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Thomas Maddux | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY CHRISTOPHER LAYNE, TEXAS A & M UNIVERSITY

The United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are locked in an intensifying great power rivalry - one that has reintroduced the risk of great power war to international politics.¹ Moreover, the United States has injected its China policy with an ideological dimension reminiscent of the Cold War with the Soviet Union that began after World War II.² Of course, it was not that long ago that the conventional wisdom in the American foreign policy establishment was that this could not happen. When the Cold War ended, great power politics was out, and the 'end of history' was in. The 'unipolar moment' was thought to be infinite, and America's hegemony was believed to be secure far into the future. America's dominance would be underpinned by international institutions, the democratic peace, and economic interdependence ('globalization').

Rosy post-Cold War forecasts all have proved illusory, and a kind of psychological bi-polarity now grips the American foreign policy establishment. As a consequence, when it comes to China, U.S. policy is beset by paradoxes. On the one hand, we are told that the international system remains unipolar with the U.S. as the top dog.³ On the other hand, today the foreign policy establishment is having a meltdown because of China. Febrile talk about the China 'threat,' abounds, and the return of great power politics - which cannot happen in a unipolar world: it takes two to tango - has been proclaimed. Paecans to the economic virtues of globalization vie with calls to 'de-couple' the U.S. economy from the China's. Yet another paradox is that, notwithstanding the Obama administration's 'pivot' (or 're-balance') to East Asia, the free-fall in Sino-American relations did not occur until Donald Trump became president. Without missing a beat, President Joseph R.

¹ Christopher Layne, "Coming Storms: The Return of Great Power War," *Foreign Affairs* 96:6 (November/December 2020): 42-48.

² Christopher Layne, "Preventing the China-U.S. Cold War From Turning Hot," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13:3 (Fall 2020): 343-385; Layne, "Hyping the China Threat," *National Interest*, 169 (September/October 2020): 21-31; Layne, "The Sound of Distant Thunder: The Pre-World War I Anglo-German Rivalry as a Model for Sino-American Relations in the Early 21st Century," in Asle Toje, ed., *Will China's Rise be Peaceful? The Rise of Great Powers in Theory, History & Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2017). This article was first presented as a paper at the Norwegian Nobel Institute's June 2014 Summer Symposium. Also, see Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

³ Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' World Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Nuno Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014); Brooks & Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

Biden's administration basically has continued – indeed amplified – the hawkish anti-China policies of its predecessor.⁴ The continuity in Washington's China policy comes as no surprise to Edward Ashbee, who shows in this article that Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was a catalyst for the hardening of Washington's China policy. Although his article was written before Biden's victory in the 2020 election, Ashbee presciently observes that the Trump administration's China policy was “forming the basis for a new consensus on how to deal with China” and therefore “unlikely to shift even if particular office holders change” (396). Spot on.

If we step back from the day-to-day events shaping Sino-American relations, the changes that have occurred in Washington's policies and perceptions toward Beijing since Donald Trump took office in January 2017 are astonishing. Although there has long been a core of ‘blue team’ security hawks advocating hard-line U.S. policies toward China, until the Trump presidency this was a distinctly minority view within the U.S. foreign policy establishment.⁵ Now it is American policy. From the time the Cold War ended until the Trump presidency, the U.S. foreign policy establishment's view of Sino-American relations has been based on the fusion of realist and liberal assumptions - an example of intellectual bipolarity. The realist side of the equation has been the belief that, following the Cold War, America's ‘hard’ (military, economic, technological) power was so overwhelming as to be unchallengeable.⁶ The other side of the equation has been ideational: the liberal internationalist assumptions positing that economic interdependence, international institutions, and democracy are mutually reinforcing, and bring peace and stability to international politics.

Guided by these liberal internationalist assumptions, the United States supported China's 2001 admission into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the expectation that deepening economic ties between the U.S. and China – ‘Chimerica’ – would be mutually beneficial, and would underpin the evolution of a cooperative relationship between Washington and Beijing.⁷ The American foreign policy establishment pretty much bought in to the argument advanced by Chinese scholars and policymakers in the early 2000s that China's rise would be peaceful.⁸ For example, G. John Ikenberry forcefully argued that even as its power increased, China would remain in the “liberal rules-based international order” (LRBIO) rather than trying to overturn it.⁹ The American foreign policy establishment believed that China would liberalize economically *and* politically if it were embedded in existing international institutions. Beijing, as then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick famously said in 2005, would play the role of a “responsible stakeholder” – that is, America's junior partner, in the LRBIO.¹⁰ The Biden administration has adopted this view. During her July 2021 meeting with Chinese foreign Yang Yi and

⁴ William Mauldin and Vivian Salama, “Biden China Policy Borrows From Trump and Adds Allies to Raise Pressure,” *Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2021, A1.

⁵ Robert G. Kaiser and Steven Mufson, “‘Blue Team’ Draws a Hard Line on Beijing,” *Washington Post*, 22 February 2000, A1.

⁶ For example, see William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24:1 (Summer 1999): 5-41.

⁷ The term “Chimerica” was coined by Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick to describe what they characterized as the “symbiotic” economic relationship that had developed between the United States and China by the early 2000s. See, Ferguson and Schularick, “Chimerica and the Global Asset Market Boom,” *International Finance* 10:3 (2007): 215-239.

⁸ For example, see Zheng Bijan, “China's ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great Power Status,” *Foreign Affairs*, 84:5 (September/October 2005), 18-24.

⁹ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Robert B. Zoellick, “Wither China: From Membership to Responsibility?” Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, New York City, 21 September 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

Vice Foreign Minister Feng Xie, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman stressed that Beijing must comply with the established rules of the international order.¹¹

During the Trump administration, the hopeful view of the trajectory of the Sino-American relationship disappeared almost overnight, and was replaced by the belief that the United States and China were locked in a new Cold War. Two things were especially stunning about this change. First is the suddenness with which the American foreign policy establishment's views about China changed. Second, the shift in China policy view bridged the deep partisan polarization and acrimony that otherwise is paralyzing American politics. Writing in July 2019, the *Financial Times's* Edward Luce - a particularly astute observer of American politics - said that "The speed with which US political leaders of all stripes have united behind the idea of a 'new cold war' is something that takes my breath away."¹² Less than two years beforehand, Luce said, the notion that the United States and China were locked in a new Cold War would have been dismissed as "fringe scaremongering." But at that point, "it is consensus." Similarly, Rana Mitter, a noted China expert, stated that: "There may only be one bipartisan issue in Washington, D.C. these days: China. Republicans and Democrats argue that containing Chinese power is the most important foreign policy task facing the US and the broader west."¹³ For good measure, the *Economist* also said that the United States and China were sliding into a new Cold War.¹⁴

That this transformation of American attitudes toward China occurred during the presidency of Trump is, at first blush, a paradox, one that Ashbee explores. After all, it would have been difficult to predict that Donald Trump would be the agent of change who shifted Washington's China policy from engagement to confrontation and containment (or, as I call it, 'confrontainment'). After all, his claim to being a 'very stable genius' notwithstanding, no one would accuse Donald Trump of being a deep thinker when it comes to grand strategy. It is doubtful, for example, that he was even slightly aware of the contemporary debates about unipolarity and its durability, as well as concepts such as hegemony, offshore balancing, or power transitions. Trump did, however, have a number of what he described as 'gut instincts' that formed his view of the role the United States should play in world politics. None of these instincts suggested that his administration's policies would set the United States and China on the path to *geopolitical* competition, one that, in time, could lead to war.

As a presidential candidate, Trump campaigned as a champion of what he called an 'America First' foreign policy. It is unclear if he knew anything about the provenance of America First (a term also used by Patrick J. Buchanan during his unsuccessful 1992 and 1996 campaigns for the G.O.P. presidential nomination). Regardless, when employed by Trump, 'America First' was simultaneously suggestive, and vague. For those with a knowledge of history, 'America First' evoked the eponymous political movement - wrongly characterized as 'isolationism' - that emerged following the fall of France in May-June 1940 to oppose America's entry into the European war.¹⁵ Trump's version of 'America First' conveyed the sense that the United States would pull-back from its overseas military commitments, shift (or devolve) security responsibilities to free-riding allies, reject international economic openness in favor of neo-mercantilism and protectionism, and renounce its

¹¹ Ken Moritsugu, "AP Interview: U.S. Call on China to Become Responsible Power," *Washington Post*, 26 July 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/21/why-seeking-alliance-with-russia-to-counter-china-wont-work/>.

¹² Edward Luce, "Getting Acclimatized to the U.S.-China Cold War," *Financial Times*, 19 July 2019 <https://www.ft.com/content/a3062586-a9ac-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04>.

¹³ Rana Mitter, "Solutions to the U.S.-China Trade War," *Financial Times*, 4 June 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/571603da-8233-11e9-a7f0-77d3101896ec>.

¹⁴ "China v. America: A New Kind of Cold War," *The Economist*, 19 May 2019, 9.

¹⁵ As Wertheim points out, the very term "isolationism" was a neologism that the interventionists created to portray in a negative light, those who argued against American intervention in the war. See *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 32-25

commitments to multilateral cooperation and institutions in favor of unilateral, go it alone, policies.¹⁶ One might have predicted that Trump would toughen America's trade policies toward China. After all, he made Peter Navarro, a leading critic of China's trade and economic policies, a key campaign aide, and then White House advisor.¹⁷ Even so, prior to his taking office, there was nothing in Trump's record that suggested his administration would lead the United States into a geopolitical, economic, technological, and ideational across-the-board competition with China.

As Ashbee notes, Trump's 2016 campaign was based on "conservative populism, economic nationalism, [and] criticisms of the liberal international order." (380). Unsurprisingly, Trump's election in November 2016 was greeted by hand wringing and teeth gnashing by the American foreign policy establishment (and its West European counterparts). From that quarter, the standard line about Trump's victory was that it would lead to the unraveling of the LRBIO - the *Pax Americana* - that emerged following World War II.¹⁸ The LRBIO's core institutions that emerged in the war's aftermath included the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (originally the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). Yet, with the (admittedly important) exceptions of the Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA), and the Paris climate accords, for all the foreboding about the LRBIO's prospects that greeted Trump's election victory, the Trump administration did not attempt to withdraw the United States from any the LRBIO's core institutions.

Similarly, Trump had a long record before taking office as a critic of America's globe-straddling alliances - especially NATO, but also with Japan and South Korea. As Ashbee says, "Trump's campaign statements not only called for 'America First,' but also decried established alliances, repudiated the U.S. role in providing defense and security as public goods, and opposed multilateral alliances and partnerships." (380). Along with what Ashbee calls the "promise of disengagement" was the goal of "requiring allies to contribute more and take a far greater responsibility for their own defense needs" (380). Although Trump talked the talk with respect to burden sharing (and, implicitly, retrenchment) he did not walk the walk. The Trump administration made no attempt to extract the United States from these alliance commitments. Indeed, notwithstanding his repeated criticism of American military involvement in the Middle East, he did not extricate the United States from the 'Forever Wars' in Afghanistan and Iran. Those tasks were left to the Biden administration.

On the other hand, when Trump took office he for sure had a beef with China. This, however, was *economic* - not geopolitical in nature. As far as can be known, Trump was unconcerned about China's emergence as a great power that was equal of the United States, the strategic implications of China's quest for regional hegemony in East Asia, or the possibility that an increasingly powerful China someday might 'rule the world' in the not too distant future.¹⁹ However, he was, and long had been, obsessed with the *economic* impact of China's rise on the United States. Pointing to America's seemingly unending trade deficits with China, and the loss of well-paying blue collar manufacturing jobs ('outsourcing') that followed

¹⁶ As a candidate, Trump was also a critic of the 'Forever Wars' in Afghanistan and Iraq, which he promised to end. He left office, however, without having done so. President Biden apparently has ended the American military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq (at least for now).

¹⁷ Greg Autry and Peter Navarro, *Death By China: Confronting the Dragon - A Global Call to Action* (New York: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2011).

¹⁸ David E. Sanger, "'Strange New Land': America in a Time of Trump," *New York Times*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/us/politics/donald-trump-presidential-agenda.html>; David Ignatius, "What President Trump's Foreign Policy Will Look Like," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/what-president-trumps-foreign-policy-will-look-like/2016/11/09/3ab88670-a632-11e6-ba59-a7d93165c6d4_story.html; Gideon Rachman, "Donald Trump Shakes Postwar Liberal Order," *Financial Times*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/bc3bc99c-a654-11e6-8898-79a99e2a4de6?mhq5j=e>; Philip Stephens, "America Can Survive Trump, Not so the West," *Financial Times*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/73313d4c-a68e-11e6-8898-79a99e2a4de6?mhq5j=e6>.

¹⁹ Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and Birth of a New Global Order* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

China's admission to the WTO, Trump said that China was 'eating America's lunch' by using unfair trade practices against the United States. In Ashbee's words, Trump depicted China "as an economic predator threatening U.S. interests, particularly those of manufacturing workers in the American 'heartlands'" (381). The result was the loss of well-paying blue collar jobs, and the gutting of the communities in the U.S. that were dependent on those jobs.²⁰

Although unnoticed at the time, Trump's message of 'Make America Great *Again*' was itself a paradox: a call for national renewal and, simultaneously, an implicit, and ironic, admission of American decline. Nevertheless, as a political message, it resonated. Trump's rhetoric on trade tapped into a reservoir of discontent among working-class Americans, especially in Rust Belt states like Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin that were the key to Trump's 2016 election, who blamed out of touch globalist elites for their straitened economic conditions. As Ashbee points out, China gave Trump's "economic nationalism a focus" (381). To play to working class concerns, Trump, a self-described 'tariff man,' launched a trade war against China by imposing high tariffs on Chinese goods exported to the American market. He, and advisors like Navarro, hoped that the tariffs on Chinese-made goods entering the United States would prompt American firms to return to the U.S. and "re-shore" the manufacturing of affected products. Trump used China as a political lever "to confront the weaknesses of establishment politics" (381). Specifically, he cited the failures of previous administrations to label Beijing as a currency manipulator, redress the bilateral trade deficits, and "impose tariffs on the scale that the PRC's mercantilism demanded" (381).

The historical record rather conclusively demonstrates the Donald Trump's personal concern with China was one dimensional: economic (and, of course, the political gain to be reaped from an economic nationalist campaign theme). Yet, Ashbee notes, during the Trump administration's first year in office, there was "a very pronounced shift in U.S. policy towards the PRC as strategic issues came to merge with economic concerns, and against this background, the BRI" (382). Senior administration officials and top regional commanders began voicing their anxiety about the *geopolitical* implications of China's rising power and ambition.²¹ In 2017, the Trump administration's National Security Strategy stated that "after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned."²² China and Russia, the National Security Strategy document said, were reasserting "their influence regionally and globally [and] are contesting our geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor." From that moment forward, it was game on for the Sino-American great power rivalry. Trump administration officials believed that the BRI was being used by Beijing to challenge both the LRPIO, and America's post-World War II extra-regional hegemony in East Asia.²³ This

²⁰ For the impact of globalization on the American white working class, see J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper 2016). Also, see Justin Gest, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press); Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 2019); Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York, Penguin, 2017); and Arie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016).

²¹ Among those expressing apprehension about a rising China were Vice-President Mike Pence, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and the head of the U.S. Pacific Command (as it then was called) Admiral Harry B. Harris. Also influential in shaping the Trump administration's China policy was Matthew Pottinger, the Senior Director for Asia on the National Security Council. Pottinger became Deputy National Security Adviser in 2018.

²² *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, December 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

²³ On the concept of extra-regional hegemony, see Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy From 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

reflected the view of the American foreign policy establishment. As a Council on Foreign Relations report said, “BRI is designed to advance an array of Chinese economic, political, and geopolitical interests.”²⁴

The Belt and Road (sometimes called the New Silk Road) is the signature policy of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Indeed, as China analyst Nadège Rolland puts it, the BRI “has become the organizing foreign policy concept of the Xi Jinping era.”²⁵ It calls for the investment of massive amounts of money - around one trillion dollars - to promote trade and economic development by constructing transportation links (railways, highways, ports, airports, industrial parks, and digital connectivity) that will tie together East Asian manufacturing hubs with Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Southwest Asia, Africa, and Europe. The BRI has also been an instrument for extending Beijing’s influence into Latin America. But the BRI’s greatest impact is as a catalyst to promote the integration of Eurasia.²⁶ Bruno Maçães, a former Portuguese cabinet minister who now is a consultant, describes the BRI’s overarching vision thusly:

An interconnected system of transport, energy and digital infrastructure would gradually develop into industrial clusters and free trade zones and then as an economic corridor spanning construction, logistics, energy, manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism, culminating in the birth of a large Eurasian common market.²⁷

Echoing Maçães, Rolland argues that the BRI is a “long-term project that aims at creating a web of connections between China and the Eurasian continent that are both hard and soft - from transportation, telecommunication, and energy infrastructure to financial integration and political coordination.”²⁸

For Beijing the BRI is driven by several policy goals. First, it is a way of addressing the overcapacity in industries such as steel, cement, and aluminum.²⁹ Production in these industries is dominated by state-owned enterprises (SOE’s) that Beijing wants to support, and which benefit directly from the BRI’s focus on constructing infrastructure. Second, the BRI buttresses China’s ‘going out’ strategy that encourages firms to compete, and invest in, foreign markets.³⁰ The BRI, however, is intended primarily to promote Beijing’s strategic and diplomatic - as well as its economic - interests by deepening ties between China and the states that sign-on to BRI. Third, the BRI is intended to advance China’s geopolitical interests. Specifically, it aims to secure China’s access to overseas sources of energy (especially in Central Asia), combat political instability on its periphery, and maintain political stability at home by boosting economic development in its far western interior in places like Xinjiang and Tibet. The BRI is not an altruistic policy. It is China’s way of pushing back at what it sees as a threat posed by America’s continuing extra-regional hegemony, and the U.S. role in the increasing tensions in the South and East China seas. As Rolland puts it,

²⁴ Jennifer Hillman and David Sacks, *China’s Belt and Road; Implications for the United States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), 9. <https://www.cfr.org/report/chinas-belt-and-road-implications-for-the-united-states/>

²⁵ Nadège Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 1.

²⁶ On Eurasia as a concept, and its operationalization as an integrated political and economic space, see Bruno Macaes, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

²⁷ Bruno Maçães, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order* (London: Hurst, 2018).

²⁸ Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century?*, 90.

²⁹ Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century?*, 99-101.

³⁰ See, David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

“China must play to its strengths as the world’s second largest economy and use its increasing wealth to gain influence with its neighbors.... This idea is at the core of BRI. Economic cooperation is not just a way to boost development or bring financial returns. It is also a tool to be used for political and strategic gain...”³¹

The BRI also was a response to Washington’s so-called pivot to Asia - or, as it now is known, the Indo-Pacific. China is seeking to counter the American pivot with one of its own: a westward strategic pivot.³²

The Trump administration’s plunge into the Second Cold War was not just about the BRI. But it certainly was an important catalyst. Ashbee uses the BRI to illuminate some of the contradictions, or paradoxes, in the Trump administration’s China policy (384-392). Washington, he notes, believed that the BRI “has a strategic, rather than economic character” (383). In order to counter it, in October 2018 Congress passed the BUILD Act to restructure U.S. development aid to focus on the kinds of infrastructure projects that are at the heart of the BRI. In contrast with Trump’s personal unilateralist leanings, however, the BUILD Act contained “a commitment to address development challenges in cooperation with established U.S. allies, including Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands”³³ (384). Also in late 2018, the U.S. announced the so-called ‘Prosper Africa’ initiative aimed at promoting growth by demonstrating the superiority of transparent markets and private enterprise. The Trump administration also responded to BRI by joining Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), a multilateral initiative spearheaded by Japan.

The Trump administration also revived the ‘Quad,’ which is comprised of the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia. As Ashbee notes, the Quad “increasingly tied strategic and military ambitions together with economic development and infrastructural development” (389). In sum, as Ashbee argues, in key respects the Trump administration’s response to BRI contradicted Trump’s own stated “gut instincts” about American foreign policy. Specifically, whereas Trump personally rejected the usefulness of allies, and the need to work multilaterally, his administration sought to enlist the support of American allies to respond to the BRI, and contain a rising China.

Of course, no matter the degree of policy congruence, all administrations engage in product differentiation to show that they are different from their predecessors. By illustrating that with respect to China, the Trump administration in fact did value working with allies, and multilateral policy approaches, Ashbee’s article undercuts the Biden administration’s claim that its China policy differs fundamentally from that of its predecessor.³⁴ For good measure, Ashbee notes, the Trump administration also valued ‘soft power’ aims in the framing of development policy: good governance; transparency, reliance on markets, compliance with human rights norms, etc. This stood in stark contrast to Beijing, which, under the BRI, provides development assistance unconditionally. American policymakers and commentators in the broader foreign policy establishment argued that U.S. “conditionally” was superior to China’s so-called “debt trap” diplomacy.³⁵

³¹ Rolland, *China’s Eurasia Century?*, 115.

³² On the Obama administration’s pivot to Asia, see Kurt Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016); Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise: An Insider’s Account of America’s Asian Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

³³ In contrast with BRI, which is supported by state resources, the BUILD Act relies on private investment rather than government funded aid.

³⁴ The distinction drawn by the Biden administration is that, in contrast to what it claims was the Trump administration’s unilateralism with respect to allies, it is working to form a broad coalition of allies to confront China.

³⁵ The prime - but not only - example of the BRI “debt trap” cited by U.S. officials is the fate of the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka. To “transform a small fishing town into a major shipping hub,” Sri Lanka borrowed some \$1.3 billion from a Chinese state owned bank. When Sri Lanka could not meet its repayment obligations, China wrote down the debt in exchange for control of the port, and a

Ashbee seeks to explain what he describes as an “ideational gap” between Trump’s gut instincts with respect to foreign policy, on the one hand, and the “guiding principles” of the American foreign policy establishment, on the other (393). Ashbee concludes that the foreign policy establishment was able to capture the administration’s China policy. There are three reasons for this. First Trumpism lacked a clear intellectual core. This he attributes, in part, to the cleavages among top officials in the administration (393). Second, “‘Trumpism’ lacked the personnel and staffing infrastructure at the sub-cabinet level with which it could have shaped policy in more credible and effective ways” (394). This, he understatedly suggests, was because “there were particular challenges staffing the Trump administration,” and hence a lack of qualified candidates. As a result, many key positions were not filled. Finally, there was a sea change in both elite, and public understandings of China (394-95).

With any good article - and this is one - there always will be quibbles. In explaining why the Trump administration adopted a China policy that contradicted Trump’s own policy preferences, it is not clear that Ashbee has quite focused on the most persuasive explanations. For one thing, most administrations have differences between (or among) specific policymakers, or institutions.³⁶ But they do not all suffer from policy incoherence. Ashbee is correct that there were “particular” - or is it peculiar? - challenges in staffing the Trump administration. But even if Trump really had been ‘a very stable (foreign policy) genius,’ he still would not have been able to staff the foreign and defense policy jobs in his administration with *qualified* individuals sympathetic to his views. For that to happen, there would need to be in place a “counter establishment,” which believes in American strategic self-discipline, and rejects the incumbent foreign policy establishment’s position on maintaining U.S. primacy, upholding the ‘Open Door,’ and preserving America’s alliances. Such a counter-establishment does not exist. To create one, advocates of strategic self-discipline would need to make “the long march through the institutions,” and stake their claim to power and influence. It is difficult to see how this can be accomplished.³⁷ Put another way, it is not apparent how a major change in America’s grand strategy could occur.

Patrick Porter suggests that a major geopolitical, or economic, setback might trigger a re-examination of the primacist and internationalist premises that drive U.S. policy.³⁸ Yet, the United States has lost wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq – and endured the financial and economic crisis caused by the 2008 Great Recession – with its grand strategy of primacy unaffected. To be sure, there are some insightful critics of U.S. grand strategy in the scholarly field of security studies. But although they have had a major impact in academic discussions, their impact on real world American grand strategy has been minimal, if that.

One might wish that Ashbee had devoted more attention to the issue of just why the American foreign policy establishment regards China as a ‘threat.’ Doubtless, some of this is threat inflation on the part of institutions, bureaucracies, and interests

99 year-least agreement to operate it. Maçães, *Belt and Road*, 47. There are indications that Beijing intends to construct a naval base at Hambantota.

³⁶ The conventional wisdom holds that a strong National Security Adviser is needed to overcome contending bureaucratic interests and forge a coherent foreign policy. The lack of such a figure - and turn-over of national security advisers - was a major foreign policy weakness of the Trump administration. On the role of the NSC, see John Prados, *Keeper of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council From Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); Bartholomew Sparrow, *The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019); Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); John Gans, *White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War* (New York: Liveright, 2019).

³⁷ On these issues, see Christopher Layne, “The U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment and Grand Strategy: How American Elites Obstruct Strategic Adjustment,” *International Politics* 54:3 (June 2017): 260-275.

³⁸ Patrick Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment,” *International Security* 42:4 (Spring 2018): 9–46.

seeking to gain a greater share of resources.³⁹ But there is also a geopolitical argument. More than a century ago, the British geographer and geopolitical thinker Sir Halford Mackinder published his classic article, “The Geographic Pivot of History.”⁴⁰ He argued that technology, especially the railroad, had neutered the traditional strategic advantage enjoyed by sea powers. Specifically, railroads made it possible for a continental great power to seize control of all of the Eurasian ‘heartland,’ and mobilize its resources to achieve world domination. Mackinder was not just dealing with hypotheticals. As a British strategist, he was concerned that if Russia prevailed in the ‘Great Game’ for control of Central Asia and Afghanistan, it could wrest control of India, the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean from Britain, and thus dislodge Britain from its position as the leading world power.

Of course, the strategic nightmare described by Mackinder of a single power controlling all of Eurasia’s resources has deep roots. In the sixteenth century, there was the threat that the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor Charles V might attain a “universal monarchy” and subdue the entire continent. The same fears prevailed with respect to Philip II, Louis XIV, and Napoleon. This was the genesis of Britain’s so-called balance of power that aimed at preventing a continental hegemon. It was also the policy inherited by the newly independent, and militarily weak, United States during the struggle for European dominance that began in 1790 with the wars of the French Revolution, and ended in 1815 with Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo. This fear carried over into the twentieth century. American entry into the two World Wars is commonly explained by the need to prevent Germany from dominating the continent and its resources.⁴¹ The same is true with respect to U.S. postwar containment of Soviet Russia. Indeed, there are parts of NSC-68, the document that set out the Truman administration’s containment policy, that read as if they had been written by Mackinder himself. As Mações observes, “Almost everything the United States did during the Cold War, at the height of its powers, was to think about Eurasia, to contemplate its future and try to determine its final shape.”⁴² Even in the age of Trump, he wrote, things have not changed.

The intellectual spirit of Mackinder pervades John J. Mearsheimer’s theory of international politics, and his policy prescriptions for U.S. grand strategy.⁴³ With respect to current American grand strategy, Mearsheimer argues that “Realism dictates that the United States should seek to remain the most powerful state on the planet...and make sure that no other power dominates its region.”⁴⁴ Lest there be any doubt, he asserts that the U.S. “*must* prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon in Asia.”⁴⁵ Such a policy, however, is likely to lead to an unnecessary and avoidable real war between the United States and China. In truth, the United States is the most secure great power in history, and has been so since the early twentieth century. It is time to go back and examine whether the premises of the Mackinder nightmare, which is based

³⁹ On the roots of threat inflation in American foreign policy, see John A. Thompson, “The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: Anatomy of a Tradition,” *Diplomatic History* 16:1 (Winter 1992): 23-43.

⁴⁰ Sir Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *Geographical Journal* 23:4 (April 1904): 421-444; Also, Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 2nd ed. (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2006) [Chapter 7, “Mahan vs. Mackinder”].

⁴¹ For example, see Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in American Foreign Relations: The Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little Brown, 1943).

⁴² Mações, *Dawn of Eurasia*, 4.

⁴³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2001). For a realist critique, and alternative view of American grand strategy, see Layne, *Peace of Illusions*; and Layne, “The ‘Poster Child for Offensive Realism: America as Global Hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12:2 (Winter 2002/2003): 120-164.

⁴⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 223.

⁴⁵ Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion* 228 (emphasis added).

on cumulative gains, falling dominoes, and bandwagoning has any validity in a nuclear world.⁴⁶ Rather than bulwarking American security, in a nuclear world U.S., extended deterrence commitments are potential transmission belts for war. As are American fears of a 'Eurasian hegemon' that provide the rationale for these commitments. There is an urgent need to re-examine the - purported - Mackinderesque verities that now are driving America's China policy. At the beginning of his article, Ashbee observes that with the advent of the Trump administration, the BRI "had come to the political forefront," and the U.S. had embarked on a great power competition with China (376). Washington's China policy of 'confrontainment' has become even more hawkish under the Biden administration. Sino-American relations seem to be locked in a downward spiral. Americans should be concerned about where this will end.

Christopher Layne is University Distinguished Professor of International Affairs, and Robert Gates Chair in National Security at Texas A & M University. He currently is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations Study Group on The Pivot to Asia and American Grand Strategy, and previously was a member of the Council's Study Group on U.S.-Taiwan Relations.

⁴⁶ For the argument that they do not, see Robert W. Tucker, *The New Isolationism: Threat or Promise?* (New York: Universe, 1972).