

***Handbook on the United States in Asia:
Managing Hegemonic Decline, Retaining
Influence in the Trump Era***

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Reviewer: Greg Raymond

For those of us who work in policy, or academia, and want to produce policy-relevant research or contemporary strategic affairs commentary, it's so often the case that the need for a precise date or dollar figure leads to an unwanted trawl of the internet along with all its distractions. Andrew Tan's new volume relieves one of that burden, instead offering the reader a compressed, succinct account of developments in the Asia-Pacific region with regard to its still most powerful and consequential player, the United States. This very engaging volume is one that many will find fills a valuable niche on the bookshelf. Besides the ready access to facts and figures, it offers its reader, in readable narrative prose, a useful and coherent account of the past few years' events that many of us have watched unfold in news clips and tweets, straddling the end of Obama and his Pivot and the arrival of Trump and his unilateralism. It also offers a series of interesting vignettes and deep dives, whether they be Andrea Benvenuti's reprise of how the outcomes of World War Two and the onset of the Cold War drew the United States ever more deeply into an Asian presence, or Pichamon Yeophantong's quick survey of Southeast Asian attitudes to the United States.

Some of these essays yield surprising and novel insights. Sean Kenji Starr's analysis of the relative profit-shares of US economic engagement in China shows that while the export figures of goods such as office machinery and IT depict significant Chinese growth, the shares of profits are very low compared with US companies. This is because of the globalisation of production and ownership and global value chains. Jai Galliot's essay on US defence R&D investigates the twin impacts of the sequestration cuts to the US defence budget in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, and the Trump policies towards strengthening the US military. In a conclusion sobering for Australian policymakers, he argues that Trump's technological scepticism and "generally anti-science policies" do not auger well for United States' capacity to maintain military superiority over China.

Apart from these very niche areas, many of the essays in the book address a central and important question: does Trump represent a real break with the past US foreign and defence policy, or is there substantial continuity? Paul J. Smith, even while noting the emergence of a “transactional realism”, sides with the notion of continuity due to the restraining effects of a military leadership that still strongly favours allies and forward presence. Benjamin Schreer considers the 2017 National Security Strategy, and what reassurance allies might take from its strong stance on China, in the light of its relative paucity of detail combined with Trump’s personal lack of credibility. Mark Beeson and Jeffrey D. Wilson address the broader impact of the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership from the perspective of geoeconomics, suggesting that future historians may see it as a turning point in declining US influence in the Asia Pacific region.

As might be expected, a number of the essays portray individual alliances and bilateral relationships, between the United States and regional countries, while others examine particular potential flashpoints and security issues such as the Korean peninsula and terrorism. In the first category, S. R. Joey Long’s brief history of the Singapore–United States partnership is a gem, covering the surprising shaky start with Lee Kwan Yew condemning the United States for behaving like an “imperialist power”, to today, where the smooth relationship is characterised by low-key and practical ways that Singapore helps the United States project its military power. In the former category, the biggest issue of all, the future of United States–China relations is given ample attention. On the latter, Robert Sutter argues that China’s domestic social and economic challenges, combined with its lack of comprehension of its neighbours’ sensitivities, will continue to limit its capacity to replace the United States.

Even in a volume of over 500 pages, there are still some gaps, perhaps inevitable given the breadth of the topic. The often-forgotten allies, Thailand and the Philippines, do not receive their own chapters. The South China Sea, a major arena for China and US contestation over the so-called ‘rules-based global order’ is also omitted as a discrete topic. And finally, perhaps reflecting the generally realist leanings of many of the contributors and flavour of many of the chapters, the region’s multilateral processes and organisations such as ASEAN are also ignored.

These absences aside, this volume does a fine job of capturing many of the critical themes and vital facts of US engagement in the Asia-Pacific region and is a worthwhile acquisition. It is of course unavoidable that more recent policy developments, such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept are missed, but this does not detract from what is a very interesting, enjoyable and helpful volume.

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