

The 'Pivot': A Twentieth Century Solution to a Twenty-First Century Problem?

Allan Behm

'The Pivot', as formulated by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011, is likely to become the keystone of the Clinton administration's strategic policy in the Asia-Pacific region. This commentary essay argues that 'the Pivot' was already out of date when it was announced, and that it is neither clear nor robust enough to guide US policy through the difficult strategic tides that will characterise the next decade or so. As such, it is more hope than plan. 'The Pivot' views the region through the lens of US strategic primacy—a primacy that is increasingly challenged by China, and Russia for that matter. The much-vaunted 'international rules based order' is an artefact of the immediate post World War Two dispensation, and unless US policy is able to accept that China, and Russia, expect to have a place at the rules-setting table, 'the Pivot' has little chance of success.

For experienced politicians, policy by mantra is a standard trick of the trade. Speaking at Japan's National Press Club in Tokyo on 23 February 1990, then-US Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney redefined the strategic role of the United States in Asia as that of a 'balancing wheel' that would regulate the conduct of strategic relations in Asia.¹ Exactly how the 'balancing wheel' entered the strategic lexicon is uncertain, though it quickly caught on as a defining and incisive expression of a regenerated US strategic interest in Asia and an intention to be a significant player in Asia's strategic future.

For their part, regional defence and foreign ministers searching for a strategic security blanket happily appropriated the term as they took comfort in this novel expression of a US security guarantee to its Asian allies. So, for instance, Gareth Evans, speaking at the 'Asia Players' session at the Davos World Economic Forum in 1995 characterised Cheney's formulation as "universally accepted".² Interestingly, just a few weeks later, in a speech

¹ Hon. Richard B. Cheney, 'To Remain in Asia', *Speaking of Japan*, vol. 11, no. 114 (June 1990), pp. 1-8.

² Senator the Hon. Gareth Evans, 'The Birth of an Asia Pacific Community', speech at World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, 28 January 1995, <foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/1995/birth.html> [Accessed 27 September 2016].

to the Asia-Australia Institute in Sydney, Evans glossed this universal acceptance as obtaining “more in private than in public statements”.³

Not one to be left behind in attaching himself to popular support for US pronouncements, Evans’s successor, Alexander Downer, used one of his first speeches as Foreign Minister to announce “[the United States] is the region’s balancing wheel and overwhelmingly a positive force for regional stability”.⁴ More than a decade later, Downer was even more fulsome in his unstinting support for Cheney’s mantra. In his 2007 Monash APEC Lecture, Downer had this to say. “The truth is that the United States has an enormous role to play in Asia—an enormous role. It is, to use a phrase, [sic] that was enormously popular in the 1980s, the ‘balancing wheel’ of East Asian security.”⁵ Leaving aside the slight error in dating Cheney’s ‘balancing wheel’ concept, Downer demonstrated just how enduring such terms can be, even though their meaning is so imprecise and their effect so difficult to measure.

A quarter of a century later, no one refers to the ‘balancing wheel’ strategy. Like most convenient but ultimately meaningless mantras, it reached its use-by date at about the time Downer was giving his Monash APEC Lecture and was consigned to the dustbin of outmoded thinking.

So, what is a balancing wheel, and how could the concept lend any substance to US strategic policy? In the science and technology of chronometry and horology, the balance wheel (or, in British parlance, the balance) has a precise meaning and utility. The balance wheel converts the energy stored in the torsion spring into regulated movements of the escapement, that in turn set in motion the elements of a clock that allow for the precise measurement of time. Prior to the development of quartz and atomic clocks, the balance wheel was the essential element providing accuracy and reliability to chronometers.

The term ‘balancing wheel’, when applied to global strategy, offers an interesting insight into the mindset of the strategic policymaker. To employ elements of a clock as the driving analogy for complex strategic systems suggests a highly structuralist approach to strategic policymaking. Moreover, it implies an order and logic to strategic affairs that simply fail to match the reality of international strategic relations. Strategic relationships

³ Senator the Hon Gareth Evans, ‘Australia in East Asia and the Asia Pacific: Beyond the Looking Glass’, fourteenth Asia Lecture, Asia-Australia Society, Sydney, 20 March 1995, <foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/1995/looking.html> [Accessed 27 September 2016].

⁴ The Hon Alexander Downer MP, ‘Australia and Asia: Taking the Long View’, address to the Foreign Correspondents’ Association, Sydney, 11 April 1996, <foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/1996/asia-long.html> [Accessed 27 September 2016].

⁵ The Hon Alexander Downer MP, ‘How Can APEC Build Regional Prosperity?’, 2007 Monash APEC Lecture, Melbourne, 19 April 2007, <www.apec.org.au/docs/07_MAL.pdf> [Accessed 27 September 2016].

are essentially unpredictable and chaotic. They are amoral and anomic. There are no inherent 'rules'. The only rules that might govern strategic relationships are those that are generated as an artefact of diplomacy, negotiation, compromise and agreement. Changes in power relationships change the rules, and major changes in power relationships (more commonly described as strategic discontinuities) have profound strategic consequences, as Philip Bobbitt details in his magisterial study *The Shield of Achilles*.⁶

What, then, were the strategic consequences of the 'balancing wheel' strategy? Fundamentally, there were none. The United States persevered with a status quo approach to its strategic relationships in Asia, maintaining its security alliances with Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia through the usual talks, dialogues and the occasional military exercise, and pursuing a cautious and rather formal diplomacy with the remaining Indo-Chinese and South East Asian states. If the 'balancing wheel' policy was intended in some way to contain or constrain China, it failed abysmally. China's international political and strategic position continued to grow in parallel with its economic expansion, the meteorology of the bilateral relationship with the United States affecting both parties equally. The occasional glow of agreement and harmony was inevitably followed by the shadow of disagreement and disharmony, the relationship constantly driven by suspicion and mistrust.

Nor did the 'balancing wheel' strategy generate any significant change in US force disposition or force projection. Again, the United States maintained a status quo force posture in the Pacific, continuing to invoke President Nixon's 1969 Guam Doctrine to encourage the nations of Asia to do more to build their self-defence capacities and rely less on the military power of the United States to guarantee their security. While the Guam Doctrine was essentially targeted at a US domestic audience increasingly hostile to conscription and fatigued by the war of attrition in Vietnam, its strategic effect was not seen until the ignominious withdrawal of the US Embassy staff from Saigon in 1975. Far from achieving 'peace with honor', Nixon's strategy set in train the defeat of the military might of the United States.

If the 'balancing wheel' strategy was designed in part at least to 'seal the deal' after more than a decade of painstaking reconstruction of the US diplomatic and strategic position in Asia following the Vietnam fiasco, it failed on that account, too. Important regional players such as Indonesia and Malaysia continued to keep the US military at arms length, while Vietnam demonstrated that economic growth and political and strategic independence could be pursued without any reliance on the military power of the United States.

⁶ Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

So, one might ask, what has the ‘balancing wheel’ to do with the ‘pivot’? The answer is that they are both manifestations of the same thing—a solution in search of a problem. The central issue here is that many US strategists and their alliance partner colleagues simply have not understood the strategic dynamics of Asia (and perhaps the strategic dynamics of the global environment more generally). It is a twentieth century mindset grappling with a twenty-first century problem.

Writing in *Foreign Policy* in 2011, the then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton unveiled the US ‘pivot’ strategy.

As the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point. ... This kind of pivot is not easy, but we have paved the way for it over the past two-and-a-half years, and we are committed to seeing it through as among the most important diplomatic efforts of our time.⁷

While Clinton introduced the new strategy by way of reference to the opportunity presenting itself to the United States to focus on things other than Iraq and Afghanistan, the core of the policy is the recognition that “the Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics”.⁸

Like ‘balancing wheel’, the term ‘pivot’ is an important concept in mechanics. A ‘pivot point’ is the centre of support for a rotating system, where ‘to pivot’ is to turn with minimum friction. Just as Cheney’s 1990 expression revealed a structuralist mindset regarding the global strategic operating system implying both order and logic, so too does Clinton’s use of the term ‘pivot’. It is as though strategic dynamics were governed by laws analogous to Newtonian physics—universal, systematic and immutable. In this construct, the US pivot to Asia will apply the force necessary to constrain China’s strategic ambitions while supplying the energy needed to boost the flagging morale of its alliance partners.

It would be comforting if the world of strategic calculation operated according to such rules: actions and reactions would be predictable, and order could be maintained through relatively simple adjustments in strategic power settings. Unfortunately, however, the facts do not fit the theory. Far from constraining—or even containing—China, the pivot has generated precisely the opposite result. It has energised China into extending its strategic buffer strategy into the South China Sea, and, far from reassuring players such as the Philippines’ President Duterte, has actually set him on a path to accommodation with and appeasement of China.

The ‘pivot’ concept has found expression in many US policy pronouncements since 2011. But there is probably no more enthusiastic a

⁷ Hillary Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011.

⁸ Ibid.

proponent of the 'pivot' strategy than Kurt Campbell, who served as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 2009 to 2013 and is credited with being one of the architects of the 'pivot'. His extended advocacy of the 'pivot',⁹ mordantly described by the *Financial Times* reviewer as "an extended job application, should Clinton emerge victorious in this year's presidential election",¹⁰ argues that the 'pivot' is essential if the United States is to maintain its long-term economic, political and strategic engagement with Asia. So far, so good. Campbell also sees the 'pivot' as a critical US response to China's growing strategic importance in Asia and its current penchant for an over-assertive approach to creating a strategic buffer in the South China Sea and managing its various territorial disputes. While Campbell does not advocate a crude containment strategy with respect to China, his combination of stepped-up diplomatic and military investment in Asia comes perilously close to containment in effect if not by design.

Campbell's book elicited a critical review by Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University and a long-term associate of Campbell.¹¹ The review in turn provoked an entertaining exchange of views between Campbell and White, studied politesse masking a measure of confected sarcasm. The nub of White's commentary addresses the fact that, if China is the principal aim of the 'pivot', Campbell's argument does not address the nature of China's strategic ambitions, their legitimacy or their acceptability to regional states. Nor, in White's view, is the book clear about the US objectives in Asia. For White, the pivotal (the term is used without irony!) strategic issue is the place of China in the Asian, indeed global, strategic dispensation and its refusal to accept a status quo based on US strategic primacy. So the question becomes less one of a 'pivot' and more one of the lengths to which the United States is prepared to go to ensure its ability to sanction Chinese ambition. It is a fair point.

For his part, Campbell appears to take umbrage at White's impertinence, rejecting his "stark and rather crude reading of Asia's politics" and dismissing his world view as "overriding and rigid".¹² He argues that the central objective of the 'pivot' is to bolster Asia's rules-based "operating system".

⁹ Kurt M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016).

¹⁰ James Crabtree, *Financial Times*, 24 June 2016, <www.ft.com/content/4c87c648-3497-11e6-ad39-3fee5ffe5b5b> [Accessed 8 October 2016].

¹¹ Hugh White, 'Book Review "The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft" by Kurt Campbell', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 4 July 2016, <www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2016/07/04/Book-review-The-Pivot-The-Future-of-American-Statecraft-in-Asia-by-Kurt-Campbell.aspx#disqus_thread> [Accessed 29 September 2016].

¹² Kurt Campbell, "'The Pivot': A Reply to Hugh White", *The Interpreter* (The Lowy Institute blog), 5 July 2016, <www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2016/07/05/The-Pivot-A-reply-to-Hugh-White.aspx> [Accessed 29 September 2016].

Built in the aftermath of the Second World War, this system consists of a complex set of legal, security, and practical arrangements that have underscored four remarkable decades of Asian prosperity and security, liberating hundreds of millions from poverty. At its heart are time-tested principles: freedom of navigation, sovereign equality, transparency, peaceful dispute resolution, sanctity of contracts, free trade, and cooperation on transnational challenges. This is a system that has served us all extraordinarily well and should be preserved.¹³

And it is this view that seems to substantiate White's subsequent claim that there is no ostensible difference between the Asian 'operating system' and the old status quo reflecting US primacy.¹⁴

For its many words and occasional repetitiveness, Campbell clearly establishes the 'pivot' for what it is: a reassertion of US strategic primacy in Asia and a reinforcement of a rules-based system developed, moderated and interpreted by the United States. The paramountcy of US interests is assumed, consistent with the exceptionalism that has characterised US foreign and defence policy since the Monroe Doctrine was extended to East Asia by virtue of Commodore Perry's excursion to secure US commercial rights in Japan in the 1850s.

The importance of the 'pivot' strategy has been amplified in commentary by a number of US allies. To take just one example: in his thoughtful *Foreign Affairs* essay in 2013 (published after his prime ministership and his resignation as Foreign Minister) Kevin Rudd accepted the intent and the force of the 'pivot'.

Debate about the future of U.S.-Chinese relations is currently being driven by a more assertive Chinese foreign and security policy over the last decade, the region's reaction to this, and Washington's response—"pivot," or "rebalance," to Asia.¹⁵

Rudd's qualification of the 'pivot' as a 'rebalance' is significant. Australian ministers have been somewhat less full throated than their US counterparts in promoting the 'pivot', preferring instead the less dramatic but more anodyne 'rebalance'. So, for instance, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, addressing the Japan Press Club in February 2016, noted that "the stability underwritten by the United States and the institutions and rules-based order put in place in the post-Second World War period cannot be guaranteed in perpetuity", and went on to say that Japan and Australia "have welcomed the US rebalance to Asia, and the increased US presence and its strategic

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hugh White, "'The Pivot': Yes, It is All about China", *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 7 July 2016, <www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2016/07/07/The-Pivot-Yes-it-is-all-about-China.aspx#disqus_thread> [Accessed 29 September 2016].

¹⁵ The Hon Kevin Rudd, 'A New Road Map for U.S.-Chinese Relations', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 2 (March-April 2013), p. 9. It is important to note that Rudd goes on in his essay to argue for a more nuanced and agile 'post pivot' approach to managing the China-US strategic relationship.

reassurances of its commitments to our region”.¹⁶ It is important here to recognise the implicit link between the ‘rules-based order’ and the strategic reassurances of the United States.

Of course, Bishop is not the only observer to prefer ‘rebalance’ as a more neutral description of US strategic policy in Asia. In an authoritative and supportive 2013 study of the US ‘pivot’ approach to Asia released by the Elliott School of International Affairs and the Sigur Center for Asian Studies at George Washington University, the team of analysts titled their work *Balancing Acts: The U.S. Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Security*.¹⁷ This study offers a measured defence of the ‘pivot’, establishing in objective terms the strategic rationale for the policy, the responses of regional actors, and the possible constraints on the policy’s success in realising its objectives. The study is prescient in recognising the critical role that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) will play in underpinning both trade harmonisation in the Pacific and the future pre-eminence of the United States in the economic affairs of the Pacific. This is a constraint fully appreciated by Kurt Campbell. The unwillingness of the US Congress to ratify the treaty, together with the ambiguous support of Hillary Clinton as one presidential contender and the opposition of Donald Trump as the other, combine to cast serious doubt on the TPP as a critical enabler of the ‘pivot’.

But what the study fails to come to grips with is the fundamental assumption that has underpinned US foreign and defence policy for more than a century and a half: the right of the United States to primacy. This assumption was as important in legitimising Cheney’s ‘balancing wheel’ as it has been in lending authority to Clinton’s ‘pivot’. Whether it is termed ‘manifest destiny’ or ‘American exceptionalism’, a right to primacy informed the transaction of US foreign and strategic policy in the Middle East and Afghanistan during the presidency of George W. Bush (neither he nor the American people were well served by the neocons who believed that democracy could be imposed upon the Islamic world), and continues to inform the strategic policy of the Obama administration. This is nowhere more evident than in the final sentence of President Obama’s 2015 National Security Strategy, which declares “[a] core element of our strength is our ... certainty that American leadership in this century, like the last, **remains indispensable**” (emphasis added).¹⁸

¹⁶ The Hon. Julie Bishop, ‘Address to the National Press Club, Japan’, 16 February 2016, <foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2016/jb_sp_160216a.aspx?w=tb1CaGpkPX%2FIS0K%2Bg9ZKEg%3D%3D> [Accessed 29 September 2016].

¹⁷ Robert G. Sutter, Michael E. Brown and Timothy J. A. Adamson, with Mike E. Mochizuki and Deepa Ollapally, ‘Balancing Acts: The U.S. Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Security’ (Washington: George Washington University, August 2013), <www2.gwu.edu/~sigur/assets/docs/BalancingActs_Compiled1.pdf> [Accessed 29 September 2013].

¹⁸ President Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington: White House, February 2015) p. 29, <www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf> [Accessed 30 September 2016].

This position is argued throughout the President's strategic policy pronouncement with a certainty and confidence that characterises virtually all high level US statements, from State of the Union addresses to debates between presidential contenders. Essentially, the international rules-based order is an artefact of US policy. This is how President Obama put it.

Our leadership has also helped usher in a new era of unparalleled global prosperity. Sustaining our leadership depends on shaping an emerging global economic order that continues to reflect our interests and values. ... We must be strategic in the use of our economic strength **to set new rules of the road**, strengthen our partnerships, and promote inclusive development. ... We will shape globalization so that it is working for **American** workers. ... We will **ensure** tomorrow's global trading system is consistent with our interests and values by seeking **to establish and enforce rules** through international institutions and regional initiatives and by addressing emerging challenges like state-owned enterprises and digital protectionism (emphasis added, and note the oblique reference to China).¹⁹

In this view, US leadership, and the strategic predominance on which it is based, is the driving force of any global order, old or new, and it is the duty of the United States to create the new rules. And there is little indication that anyone else has a role other than accepting what the United States proposes. President Obama continued as follows.

We have an opportunity—and obligation—to **lead the way** in reinforcing, shaping, and where appropriate, creating the rules, norms, and institutions that are the foundation for peace, security, prosperity, and the protection of human rights in the 21st century. The modern-day international system currently relies heavily on an international legal architecture, economic and political institutions, as well as alliances and partnerships the United States and other like-minded nations established after World War II. Sustained by robust American leadership, this system has served us well for 70 years, facilitating international cooperation, burden sharing, and accountability. ... [T]he vast majority of states do not want to replace the system we have. Rather, they look to America for the leadership needed **to both fortify it and help it evolve** (emphasis added).²⁰

The issue here is not whether the United States actually has the moral and political authority it claims (China and Russia reject US paramountcy) or whether the allies of the United States accept its leadership (they do). The issue is that the United States considers that it has an inherent right to primacy and that the right to primacy, declared or not, underpins all US foreign and defence policy. It is an ingrained belief that goes to the heart of the strategic competition between the United States and China at the macro-policy level and to the difference of view between Kurt Campbell and Hugh White at the micro-policy level. And it is a critical problem for the 'pivot' or 'rebalance'.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

In passing, it is important to note that ‘manifest destiny’ is not a policy. It is just an idea, and while the neocons appear to find it attractive, it is one that historically many Americans have disputed. There has long been a strong tendency to isolationism among Republican Americans, while many US liberals favour a more inclusive and permissive approach to the formulation of US foreign and strategic policy. But among contemporary strategic policymakers the primacy of US power does appear to prevail.

Like all other nations, the United States has no option but to strive to protect and promote its interests, wherever they are engaged. That requires agility and flexibility, an ability to make good strategic decisions quickly, to capture opportunities where they arise and to mitigate threats when and where they occur. It is less a question of ‘rebalancing’ the strategic assets available to it by redistributing military forces from the Middle East (where US popular support for military operations has evaporated) to the north Pacific and east Asia. Rather, it is a question of envisaging a new world order—and its operating rules—that accepts the fundamental change that China’s ascent represents. In that world order, China’s power is increasingly less local and regional as it becomes more globally distributed—an inevitable consequence of its ‘one belt, one road’ strategy. And in that new world order, China demands the same right to make the rules as the United States and its allies claim.²¹ This is the subordinate problem with the ‘pivot’.

It has become something of a convention for many commentators on the US-China strategic relationship to view the issue in binary terms: as a zero-sum game, in which either the United States or China ‘wins’; regional states will need to make a choice between Beijing or Washington, trading off their economic interests against their security interests, or *vice versa*; China is becoming more aggressive while the United States is ‘running out of puff’. And there are others who more darkly forecast that, like Rome, the United States will decline and fall, while China’s rise to the top is inevitable.²² These are gross oversimplifications, mirroring a structuralist and mechanist worldview that ignores the randomness of events, the arbitrary choices of many decision-makers, the volatility of community sentiment, the force of ideology and the seductive power of nationalism. They also overlook the enormous originality and resilience of the United States.

In this fast-moving and freewheeling environment, Hobbesian concepts such as ‘political geometry’ and structuralist expressions such as ‘security architecture’ fail to capture the instability and transience of events, the nature of ambiguity and the impact of strategic discontinuities. This is part of

²¹ The legitimacy of China’s interest in being a rule maker rather than a rule taker is the most significant conceptual difficulty facing the long-term realisation of the ‘pivot’. See Allan Behm, ‘Beware an Unhappy Dragon’, *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 29 July 2016, <www.aspistrategist.org.au/beware-unhappy-dragon/> [Accessed 30 September 2016].

²² See, for instance, Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

the problem facing US policymakers: China's ascendancy represents a major strategic discontinuity that the current rules-based international order is simply unable to address. And it will continue to be a strategic discontinuity until China properly incorporates itself within the system of rule-making states without feeling itself to be constrained or contained by a US franchise that is unable to accept its legitimate strategic aspirations and ambition. This is the biggest issue with which the 'pivot' will need to deal if the strategy is to be successful.

There is no doubt that the United States has the diplomatic skills, economic strength and military assets to manage its longer-term strategic interests in the Pacific as the region continues to grow in economic and strategic importance. The question that hangs over the realisation of 'pivot' is whether the United States has the political will to address the critical issue of China's role in the development of the new regional strategic order. This demands vision, imagination, patience, perseverance and, above all, leadership at the highest level if the United States is to rise above the zero-sum game that is playing itself out at present. A distracted or uninterested President, a hostile Congress, a disengaged Secretary of State and a military leadership more focused on demonstrations of power and sabre-rattling than in managing and/or solving disputes could singly or in combination render the 'pivot' effectively meaningless.

The real problem generated by terms such as 'pivot' and 'rebalance' is that they appear to offer an answer to a question that has not been fully considered—a solution in search of an issue. Instead of attempting to bolster the old status quo, the United States needs to focus its energies on creating a new one that meets the interests of all engaged parties, not simply or principally those of the United States. This, it would appear, is not quite in character for the United States, or at least for its current crop of policymakers.

This, perhaps, is where the allies of the United States have a particular and constructive role to play. The traditional US alliance model is US leadership and allies' followership. Whether it was Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt's fawning 'all the way with LBJ' (US President Johnson) in 1966 or British Prime Minister Tony Blair's craven enthusiasm for the Iraq war in 2003, the allies of the United States have generally been expected to follow along meekly behind the United States, ostensibly in return for the hitherto unquantified benefit of US strategic protection. Such behaviour does not reflect a partnership between equals, but rather a level of dependency where one party calls the tune and the other dances as required. As the history of US engagement in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates very clearly, the preparedness of its allies to fall in line has not served US political or strategic interests well. In any properly balanced and well-managed alliance, it is as much the duty of allies to advise and warn as it is to support and comfort. This principle applies as much to the 'pivot' as it might have to

the decision by Australia and Britain, among others, to support the United States in its destruction of Saddam Hussein and, as a consequence, the destruction of Iraq.

Whether the 'pivot' is a strategic game-changer or simply another buzzword masking ambiguity and uncertainty depends ultimately on two deeply interrelated factors, touched upon earlier in this essay. First, is the United States able to accept China as a legitimate player in Asia's strategic affairs and, in consequence acknowledge that China has legitimate strategic interests? And second, is the United States able to manage its interlocking set of regional alliances in a way that leverages the position, interests and regional relationships of its partners? And if the answer to those questions is 'yes'—and it should be—does the US leadership have the vision and political will to exercise those skills? And if the answer to that question is yes—and it should be—a 'paradigm shift' is needed that will render the 'pivot' obsolete.

The pace of strategic change in the Asia-Pacific is too fast, too multi-dimensional and too unpredictable for structuralist ideas like 'balancing wheel', 'pivot' and 'rebalance' to have much enduring effect. Inevitably, the United States will be, and needs to be, engaged strategically in Europe, in the Middle East, in Africa and in its own hemisphere. Russia will continue to challenge US policy in both Europe and Asia. With its global interests, the United States will need to retain its global strategic positioning, and to achieve this in a world of economic and political uncertainty, rising technology costs and the consequences of demographic changes on its ability to raise, sustain and maintain military forces, the United States will require diplomatic and military capabilities that are agile, flexible and decisive. It will need alliances that are equally agile, flexible and decisive. Such an outcome is more likely to result from a comprehensive and proactive re-imagining of the strategic possibilities of the twenty-first century than from a more limited 'pivot' to Asia that reflects twentieth century conventions.

Allan Behm is a widely respected writer and commentator on defence and security matters. He is Chair of the Canberra Writers Festival and CEO of FearLess, a not-for-profit working with people who have post traumatic stress injury, and their families. He is a former head of the International Policy and Strategy Divisions of the Department of Defence. behm@kpond.com.