The United States as a Rising Power in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Diplomatic Historical Analysis

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Annotated Presentation

Amidst the current discussion of “rising” powers in Asia and the Pacific Ocean, I am mindful, as a diplomatic historian, that the United States was a rising power in the region once too. Is it still rising, one is tempted to ask, or has it become an “established,” even status quo power? Or is it now a “declining” power, relative to the movement of others, if not in a physical, absolute sense?

The stakes implied by the question of the U.S. power status are high, for there is an attendant question involving the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, if not the entire world: namely, that of whether a marked rise in the power of one country in terms of military and economic strength and political influence, alongside that of other countries in a regional international system, is inherently conflictual—and even likely to result in war.

There is a currently fashionable idea, formulated mainly by political scientists though, to be sure, based on the comparative analysis of relevant cases from the past, that power discrepancies, particularly when levels are unstable and can shift, are in themselves causes of conflict. An especially effective presentation of this idea, termed “The Thucydides Trap,” is that of Graham Allison and his colleagues in the Belfer Center at the Harvard Kennedy School. Theirs is a serious study and deserves to be taken seriously as a projection of what could well, and even “likely” will, occur. Their starting point is the conclusion of the Athenian general (strategos) and historian of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides: “It was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this inspired in Sparta, that made war inevitable.” In 12 of the 16 cases that the Belfer Center group examined over the last 500 years in Europe and Asia, the result of a “rising” power challenging a “ruling,” or established, power was the outbreak of war. In the Asia-Pacific region today, given current power trajectories, the Belfer Center group contend, “war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than is recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not.” In the realm of popular literature too, including the technologically very well informed book by Peter Singer and August Cole, *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War* (2015), a power showdown between the United States and China in the Pacific is presented as not just plausible but as entirely possible.

Somewhat more optimistically, the Belfer Center researchers found from their historical survey: “When the parties avoided war, it required huge, painful adjustment in attitudes and action on the part not just of the challenger but also the challenged.” What might this mean for the United States and for the People’s Republic of China, and also for other countries in the Asia-Pacific region?

My hypothesis, deriving from the experience of the Atlantic world, with whose history as a scholar I am somewhat more familiar, is that adjustment, though it might be painful and will require concessions—mutual concessions, I would emphasize—can be brought about peacefully if and when there is a shared concept of order—that is, a general acceptance of the general
principles and even specific rules on the basis of which relations, including trade and military relations, are conducted. This premise—common agreement on basic principles—is a very large part of what made possible the Great Rapprochement between the United States and Great Britain in the 1890s and later, following the Second War World, the passing of the torch of Atlantic leadership from London to Washington, D.C. This is a noteworthy, and exemplary, power transition without a power clash.

A “rising” power, such as the United States itself was at the beginning of the last century, needs to be at least somewhat deferential to other, perhaps greater powers—respectful of the existing international order, including the balance of power in the regions which it wishes to enter. In Europe, as Henry Kissinger has emphasized, the “balance of power” was itself a part of international order. It was, that is to say, an idea, a norm, a set of rules, and not just a circumstance. The European regional balance, Kissinger explains, “developed not only in practice—as is inevitable in the absence of hegemony—but as a system of legitimacy that facilitated decisions and moderated policies.” He comments, for purposes of contrast: “Such a congruence does not exist in Asia, as is shown by the priorities the major countries have assigned to themselves.” In this respect, there has been, in the Asia-Pacific region, what might even be termed a geo-diplomatic vacuum.

Has it been a priority for the United States to fill this vacuum diplomatically? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. And, today, perhaps.

A rising power, such as the United States of America clearly was by the late1890s, needed, in order to be considered more than an upstart and a danger to others, as I have suggested, to project a concept of order along with its power—in a sense to justify it. This order-concept had to be consistent with its own institutions and history, which in any case it naturally reflects. Such consistency makes it appear authentic to others and also, and very importantly, predictable to them. In order to be acceptable to others, and eventually even to be considered legitimate internationally, the order-concept needs to be not just self-expressive but also inclusive—and adaptive as well. It has to be sufficiently broad and flexible to be responsive to and able even to accommodate the interests, views, rights, and sometimes “demands” of others.

What this requires, in practical terms, is a foreign policy that is “open”—a foreign policy whose statements of principle are clear, rational, and explicable, in public discourse as well as in quiet, diplomatic talks. Along with the need for “open” policy goes a need for a diplomacy which, though secret at times, is patently collaborative. Among diplomats themselves, within the corps diplomatique and in multilateral settings, this means being collegial. The practitioners of such a diplomacy, in order to be effective, should be authoritative politically, competent professionally, and also, when situations call for it, courageous personally. That is, a diplomat should be willing to take the initiative when there is need or opportunity—irrespective, conceivably, of existing official policy guidance or the readiness of a government to use its assets to back up a diplomatic move. It is a delicate balance for a diplomat. Secretary of State John Kerry, for example, feels this tension every day.
A diplomat in today’s world has a responsibility beyond the nation-state. This responsibility is well noted in the work of Australia’s own Hedley Bull. In his now-classic book, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, Professor Bull explains that, “within international society,” order is the consequence not merely of “contingent facts,” such as a balance of power happening to have arisen, but also on these three factors: “a sense of common interests in the elementary goals of social life; rules prescribing behaviour that sustains those goals; and institutions that help to make these rules effective.” Interests, rules, and institutions. One of the institutions involved in maintaining, and even in creating, social order in the world, including the Asia-Pacific region, is, diplomacy. In what follows, I would like to focus on the role that institutionalized, professional diplomacy has played—and sometimes not played—in the course of the “rise” of the United States to global power, a process that began in the Pacific. Has U.S. diplomacy made a difference there, a positive difference? If not, why not? What might we learn from the record that could be applicable to the present situation? What “lessons” might there be for the educational training of diplomats? And, possibly, even for the future agenda of the International Forum on Diplomatic Training, the IFDT?

Diplomacy, it must be acknowledged, often is regarded as a “weak force”—and compared with military force, it is. Nonetheless, in many circumstances, diplomacy can make a difference, the essential difference. And, sometimes, it only can make the difference. The late Monteagle Stearns, a highly respected American diplomat who served as U.S. ambassador to Greece at a difficult time, in his book *Talking to Strangers: Improving American Diplomacy at Home and Abroad*, states rather bluntly, but thought-provokingly: “what the diplomat cannot accomplish, policymakers will usually have to do without.”

In the case of the United States, with regard to the Asia Pacific, the essential requirements of truly effective diplomacy—political authority, professional competence, and personal courage—have not always been met. Sometimes, however, they have been. What I would like to do now is to examine, in sequence, three stages of transpacific relations in which the United States has projected, articulated, and tried to maintain, with mixed but I think ultimate success, a system of order for the wider region. The stages I have in mind are: First, the long period of advocacy of the Open Door Policy from 1899 to 1941. Second, the period of what might be called that of American Supremacy in the Asia Pacific lasting from 1945 to about 1972, with the trip of President Richard Nixon to China and his and Henry Kissinger’s exercise of “triangular diplomacy.” Third, the period of projected, and in many cases, actually realized Partnerships of the United States with countries of the larger Asia-Pacific region, including those in Southeast Asia and also the Indian Ocean. The present period—the Partnerships era—is inherently more “multilateral,” with multi-party arrangements, as well as informal networks, to some degree replacing the “hub and spoke” pattern of the previous, security-oriented treaties and other agreements of the 1950s and 1960s. Each of these historical periods—the Open Door Policy era, the American Supremacy era, and the Partnerships era—has a distinct diplomacy. Yet there is also a high degree of continuity from one to the other.
America’s “Pacific” rise, as everyone knows, was not peaceful. The United States fought a war against Spain, bringing to an end that country’s history as a great power, not only in the Pacific. This was a power transition that had little to do with diplomacy (Slide 2). The U.S. occupation and administration of the Philippines that followed, and that was carried out in the name of “benevolent assimilation,” entailed the use of military force against a Filipino nationalist insurrection. The islands that Spain had held in Micronesia were sold off to Germany, which afterward lost its Pacific territories to Japan as well as to New Zealand and Australia during the First World War. The United States was not just a bystander in witnessing these consequences. It watched the power transitions there with great interest, and some concern.
Its diplomacy regarding the region was governed by the policy of the Open Door, as articulated in Secretary of State John Hay’s circular Notes of 1899 and 1900 (Slide 3). The Notes sought the acceptance of other powers having interests, as well as rights, in China of the basic principles of commercial non-discrimination and Chinese territorial and administrative integrity. The policy was an expression of America’s “rise,” yes, but also of its weakness, organizational as well as physical. In truth, the power of the United States, including its military and naval assets, was then nowhere near being adequate to protect U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region, especially after the annexation of the Philippines which were more of a liability strategically than an asset. Even at the time, this was for Uncle Sam seen as a big stretch—an “imperial overstretch,” as the historian Paul Kennedy might call it (Slide 4).
The distance was enormous—as shown on a contemporary map, from California to the Philippines: 8,300 miles (Slide 5). This was more than just geographical distance. The scale of the Pacific and the numerous social and cultural differences it contains, have conditioned, and complicated, U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy to this day. There was a high premium on those who knew the area and its peoples.
The Open Door Policy probably would not have come about had it not been for the knowledge, initiative, and influence of the American diplomat W.W. [William Woodville] Rockhill, a scholarly person, with experience in Asia. He was the first American to learn to speak Tibetan, for instance. He also studied Sanskrit and Chinese. It was he upon whom Secretary Hay called to draft the Open Door Notes. The actual task of securing the adherence of other powers, including Great Britain with its extensive interests in China, to the Open Door principles, fell to the U.S. official representatives in London, Tokyo, Paris, Rome, Berlin, and St. Petersburg. This—the diplomatic factor—is often overlooked. American power alone did not “speak.” Persuasion was required. Success, with some hesitation on the part of the countries addressed, was achieved, albeit with most of the respondents premising their acceptance on the condition that the other interested powers make “a similar declaration.” Despite the conditionality of the responses, Hay’s initiative was considered a triumph which, diplomatically, it was.

Rockhill himself soon was sent to China as a special envoy to represent the United States in a Conference of Ministers that followed the Boxer Rebellion. During those negotiations, he argued against the demand for full reparations, and persuaded the other powers to settle for a
lump sum of $333 million to be divided in proportion to expenses they incurred during the intervention. The U.S. share under the Boxer Protocol was used, at Rockhill’s urging, to fund student exchanges: the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program—a forerunner, perhaps, of today’s Fulbright Program. One of the beneficiaries of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program was the philosopher Hu Shih, who later became the Republic of China’s ambassador to the United States (1938-1942). Rockhill’s role in Peking may be considered a “lesson” in diplomatic ingenuity and even opportunism, as well as a manifestation of the U.S. government’s relative “disinterest,” and therefore perhaps its less punitive, more forward-looking policy. The essential point I wish to make here that the Open Door Policy was, at the diplomatic level, collegial, however unilateral the proclamation of the policy itself seemed to be.

The new, relatively impartial involvement of the United States in Asia led to Theodore Roosevelt’s being invited, as U.S. President, to mediate the Russo-Japanese War—a conflict that by early 1905 was proving costly to both sides—a “mutually hurting stalemate,” to use the term of Bill Zartman and other negotiation theorists of today. The U.S. Minister to Japan at that time was Lloyd Griscom. Being in Tokyo, Griscom was in a much better position than were officials in Washington to sense when the time might be right—the situation “ripe”—for a possible presidential intervention. “To bring about peace between two warring powers is the dream of every president or ruler, and President Roosevelt was no exception,” Griscom recalled. “I received intimations from Washington that I should be on the lookout for the timely moment. It had to be carefully chosen; if the mediator offered his suggestion too soon, he ran the risk of a humiliating rebuff.” Following the battle of Mukden, which the Japanese had won but with great difficulty, “the only remaining question,” wrote Griscom, was whether the Russian Baltic Fleet, “nearing Japan, could wrest back control of the sea.” Until then, the Russians were “adamant against peace proposals.” However, the “overwhelming victory” of Admiral Togo at Tsushima Straits, which almost completely wiped out the Russian naval force, caused the Japanese government, wishing to end the war while it was ahead, to ask President Roosevelt, sympathetic to Japan but formally neutral, to mediate. The Russians, with the balance of power in Asia having decisively tipped against them, had little choice but to go along, hoping to salvage diplomatically what they had lost militarily and navally.
The result was the Treaty of Portsmouth (Slide 6). Although President Roosevelt personally received the Japanese and Russia negotiators in Washington, D.C., he himself did not actually mediate the talks, which were conducted directly between the parties, and were essentially bilateral. The negotiations took place not in Washington but at the much cooler, more isolated location of the Naval Shipyard at Kittery, Maine. Roosevelt did, at a critical point, suggest a compromise that facilitated final agreement. He suggested that control of the Russian island of Sakhalin be divided. The Japanese accepted this half-loaf solution and dropped their demand for a large reparations payment. President Roosevelt was recognized for his sponsorship of the talks by being awarded a Nobel Prize for Peace (Slide 7). The United States now was not just a Pacific as well as Western Hemispheric power but also a recognized international arbiter.
T.R. made the most of the newly enhanced status of the United States by sending the Atlantic Fleet—the “Great White Fleet”—around the world. American ships visited Australia, where they were warmly welcomed (Slide 8), as well as the Philippines, Japan, and China, before steaming into the Indian Ocean, transiting the Suez Canal, and returning home.
As a demonstration of American power and authority, however, the Fleet’s “peace” voyage was not altogether successful, not so much because it aroused competitive anxieties as because of some of the technical and operational deficiencies the American vessels displayed. These were well noted in the international press. Some of the advance publicity given the voyage thus probably was counter-productive. There is a caution here, a “lesson” perhaps, for the conduct of public diplomacy, particularly that of navies, and of militaries in general. When seeking to impress upon others a country’s—or an alliance’s—power through large-scale maneuvers, do it efficiently.
The Washington Conference of 1921-1922, though often called Washington Naval Conference, dealt mainly with the Far East (Slide 9). All of the major treaties that resulted from it had a bearing on the situation in the Pacific, both on the balance of power there and on the international legal order which could prevent that balance from being further upset—as it had by the First World War. Germany had been displaced from its positions in the Pacific and in China. Japan’s position commensurately “rose” with its takeover of some of Germany’s island possessions and its position on the Shantung peninsula. For the United States, Japan emerged as the main potential threat to its interests in the Pacific—and the most likely enemy in a war. “Plan Orange,” for that contingency, had been in preparation at the Naval War College for a decade or more.

American diplomacy during the Washington Conference was impressively conducted by Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, who opened it with a dramatic speech in which he stated, shockingly, that the United States was prepared to scrap nearly thirty capital ships and to accept a ten-year moratorium on capital ship construction. This commanded attention, and it put pressure on the other powers also to make real concessions. Three major agreements were negotiated. The Four-Power Treaty provided for a possible “joint conference” if there should
develop between any of the High Contracting Parties—the United States, the British Empire, France, and Japan—“a controversy arising out of any Pacific question” involving their rights not settled by diplomacy. The Five-Power Treaty, including Italy as well, established a basic 5:5:3:1.67:1.67 ratio for the relative size of the American, British, Japanese, French, and Italian navies, and, significantly, prohibited the expansion of fortifications in the Pacific (Slide 10).

The Nine-Power Treaty, signed as well by Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, and China itself, committed the signatories to “respect the sovereignty, the independence, and the territorial integrity of China” and to “use their influence for the purpose of effectually establishing and maintaining the principle of equal opportunity for the commerce and industry of all nations throughout the territory of China.” This was an American diplomatic triumph, for what it did was, in effect, to “internationalize” the U.S. Open Door Policy—in principle at least.

Secretary Hughes said in an address to the American Historical Association later in 1922: “The Washington Conference, if its work continues to enjoy the same support in public sentiment which was so emphatically expressed at the time, will not only afford a better assurance of peace and the continuance of friendly relations, but will serve to illustrate the
method of effective international cooperation which fully accords with the genius of America institutions.” His use of the word “effective” as applied to “international cooperation” may well have been an indirect reference to President Woodrow Wilson’s universalist design for the League of Nations, which the United States had declined to join. It was an implicit assertion of the relative realism of focusing on the issues of a particular geographical region, the Asia Pacific. Hughes’s statement also recognized the importance of constitutional processes, i.e., paying attention to the need for bipartisan Congressional support—and domestic politics. The American delegation at the Washington Conference included—as the U.S. delegation to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference did not—a Republican Senator, Henry Cabot Lodge, and also a Democratic Senator, Oscar Underwood.

A key figure in the negotiation, on whom Secretary Hughes relied for his treaty knowledge and also his Asia expertise, was John Van Antwerp MacMurray, the Chief of the State Department’s Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Slide 11). He had served both in China and Japan as well as, earlier, in Siam. For MacMurray, as for Hughes, the Washington treaties—the “Washington System,” as it has come to be called—was a system of order. He saw it not as a...
rigid system, but as a flexible system, and one that depended for its “continuance” on cooperation among the signatories, including the signatory powers’ diplomatic representatives. Unfortunately, soon after the treaties were concluded, MacMurray noted, some of the signatories, including the Chinese and the British, in their pursuit of “national” interests began to act unilaterally, making or demanding concessions separately, without consultation.

In the case of the United States, Hughes’s successor as Secretary of State, Minnesota Senator Frank Kellogg, best known for the Kellogg-Briand Anti-War Pact (Slide 12), succumbed to this competitive international “bidding” pressure, which the introversions of American domestic politics reinforced, to release China from some of its treaty obligations. MacMurray, feeling that he lacked the authority derived from political support at home, left his position as U.S. Minister to China and briefly resigned from the Foreign Service.

In a later memorandum, which among scholars of the subject has become famous, MacMurray lamented that, as “the intended system of cooperation” created by the Washington Conference “was allowed during 1925-1929 to fall into desuetude, the formulation of principles upon which it was to have been based has inevitably lost authority. The Washington Treaties
have therefore ceased in practical fact to be available as a means of accommodating such strains as may arise from the changes in equilibrium that lately have taken place in the Far East.” He was referring of course to the Japanese military takeover of Manchuria, in defiance of the League of Nations Covenant, the Kellogg Pact, and the Nine-Power Treaty (Slide 13).

He did not consider the Japanese to be the only ones at fault, noting that Japan’s prior adherence to the terms of its Washington commitments had been relatively good. MacMurray is unusual in American diplomatic history in being neither China-centric nor Japan-centric. (This, too, may be considered a “lesson” for diplomacy—and for the training of diplomats. That is, not to train in languages and national cultures exclusively, so that the trainees will reflexively take “sides” as, for example, either “China hands” or “Japan hands.”) Nor was Jack MacMurray a nationalistic America-firster. He was a believer in U.S-led international cooperation and objective, impartial diplomacy, aimed at timely adjustment of differences through collegial action, punctuated by the support of military force if necessary as reinforcement—to resolve differences that could, otherwise, lead to major war.
Unfortunately, American foreign policy during most of the decade of the 1930s, was both weak in terms of the power available to back it up and, as far as the Asia-Pacific region was concerned, too inflexible. Circumstances, abroad and also at home, were profoundly unfavorable. World trade was spiraling downward and the U.S. government, with Herbert Hoover as president when the Great Depression hit the country, was virtually immobilized. Hoover’s Quaker pacifism was a personal factor, a subjective one, in precluding the United States from taking really any action in response to the situation in Manchuria. His Secretary of State Henry Stimson, a lawyer by training and experience, judged Japan to be the party in the wrong. In an idenic note sent to the governments of China and Japan, Stimson declared that the American government “deems it its duty” to notify both that “it can not admit the legality of any situation de facto nor does it intend to recognize any treaty or agreement entered into” which may impair American treaty rights, including those relating to China or “international policy relative to China, commonly known as the open-door policy.” Though understandable, in light of past U.S. policy, Stimson’s statement was, from a diplomatic perspective, deplorable. This, I might note, has not always been by view of the policy of Stimson, a statesman I generally admire.

“As often happens in Anglo-American law,” the diplomatic historian Waldo Heinrichs comments, “Stimson was using precedent to create what amounted to new law.” He imparted “more acceptance” to Hay’s Open Door Notes than existed. He included Manchuria “in China proper” whereas the Nine-Power Treaty had not been so precise. He gave “positive force” to the Kellogg Pact which its signatories had hardly intended. He directed American policy “explicitly and unequivocally against Japanese action.” Perhaps most dangerously, he “established a wrong without a remedy.” What, henceforward, could American diplomats do? Even Hoover’s successor as President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, faced with more immediate problems including mass unemployment in the United States, went along the strictures that Stimson’s declaration imposed.
The Stimson Doctrine straitjacket continued its hold on American policy, as well as its diplomacy. A conference held in Brussels in November 1937 to review the Nine-Power Treaty accomplished little (Slide 14). Japan, which already had left the League of Nations, refused to cooperate. The American delegation, headed by former Under Secretary of State Norman Davis, indicated that the United States was following the situation in the Far East. Not leading it. The State Department official and later historian, Herbert Feis, judged in retrospect that the Brussels Conference was “the last good chance to work out a stable settlement between China and Japan.”
Diplomacy in the region, such as it was, thereafter was left largely to American ambassadors. The most influential of these was the long-time U.S. ambassador in Japan, Joseph Clark Grew (Slide 15), who called for “constructive conciliation.” In the view of the State Department’s Adviser on Far Eastern Affairs, Stanley K. Hornbeck, a former academic and a China expert (and strongly anti-Japanese), Grew’s suggestions for rational adjustment and compromise verged on “appeasement.” Grew did the best he could, however, and when Prince Konoye was replaced by General Hideki Tojo as Japan’s prime minister, he tried to keep relations going through his friend, Admiral Teijiro Toyoda, the new foreign minister.

Grew’s personal view, according to his private secretary Robert Fearey, is that “the die had been cast” when Prime Minister Konoye gave up on his idea of a mid-Pacific personal meeting with President Roosevelt. He had wanted this in part to escape the control of Japanese militarists. That such a high-level meeting could have been held, and that it might have prevented war, remains one of the great counterfactual speculations in the history of Japanese-American relations. Roosevelt himself appears seriously to have considered the idea, even calculating that Alaska, being on the great-circle route, would be the easiest meeting-place. However, when the Japanese ambassador, Admiral Nomura, asked him about it, he said it was
important to settle a number of “fundamental and essential questions” beforehand, “if the success of the conference was to be safeguarded.” Also, the president said, it would be “necessary for us to discuss the matter fully with the British, the Chinese and the Dutch.” Presumably also with the Australians, who were effectively represented at Washington by Richard Casey. The Chinese ambassador was Hu Shih. Collaboration was a constraint, yet that is what the cooperative “order” in the Pacific that the United States had been advocating necessitated.

President Roosevelt did not involve himself further in the details of the U.S.-Japanese talks which were conducted, with the aid of several State Department Japan specialists, principally by Secretary of State Cordell Hull, a respected Wilson-era figure—a man of high morality and strict adherence to principle, though with little international experience (Slide 16). A truly bizarre factor in the discussions, which were held secretly in Hull’s hotel apartment, was the intrusion into them of a group dubbed by a critical Stanley Hornbeck the “John Doe Associates.” These included an energetic Catholic missionary, Father James Drought, who brought a compromise plan designed to establish peace in the Pacific. Purportedly a reflection of
views within the Japanese government, the Drought-presented plan actually was his own—and perhaps a reflection of the Maryknoll Mission’s interests in Asia. Because Drought was American, the Japanese government not-unreasonably assumed that the ideas he presented to them, were perhaps indicative of hitherto unstated U.S. government views. The result was a confusing situation. When Secretary Hull finally restated the basic U.S. policy position—the need for Japan’s military to be withdrawn from mainland China as well as from Indochina—his doing so may well have appeared to the Japanese government that the United States had hardened its position! Similarly, American officials could conclude, despite the “John Doe” assurances, that the Japanese government (whose communications they had for some time been intercepting), had no interest in leaving China (though Indochina, maybe) and was not interested in compromise. Which, by then, was true. (Surely this history is a “lesson” in avoiding the involvement of amateurs in official diplomacy. It is also perhaps also a caution about what today is called Track II diplomacy. Negotiating “tracks” should be kept distinct and separate.)

A further intrusion into U.S. foreign policy making, if it may be so described, though not into the actual negotiating process, came at the last minute from within the U.S. government itself: the Department of the Treasury. Headed by Roosevelt’s good friend and neighbor Henry Morgenthau, Jr., the Treasury Department had long been involved in shoring up the Chinese economy—“monetary diplomacy,” Morgenthau called it. One of his top advisers, the economist Harry Dexter White, wrote an extraordinary memorandum, which Secretary Morgenthau passed on to Secretary Hull and the State Department, proposing that, as a way to prevent a war with Japan, the United States should offer to buy warships from it and, in exchange, the American embargo on the export of oil, scrap iron, etc., to it could be relaxed. The State Department took the Treasury idea sufficiently seriously, with even Far Eastern Adviser Hornbeck having a hand, that it altered the proposal to make it impartial: to include a similar large-scale economic offer to China! Nothing came of this grand proposal. It was too late, and too imaginative. What it does indicate, however, is the latent power that the United States had, with its large economy steadily getting stronger owing in part to the Roosevelt administration’s arms-production drive. How little-applied to actual Asia-Pacific diplomacy, however, was the economic element of the “re-risen” power of the United States in the late Open Door Policy era.
At the end of the Second World War, with the formal surrender on September 2, 1945, of the Imperial Japanese Forces to General Douglas MacArthur, the United States reigned supreme in the Pacific Ocean—an “American Lake,” as some began to call it (Slide 17). Indeed, under the International Trusteeship System (Chapter XII) of the United Nations Charter which earlier in the year had been signed in San Francisco, the United States in 1947 assumed control over the Pacific island territories previously supervised by Japan under a League of Nations mandate. The U.S. did so as the unique possessor of a “strategic area” trusteeship. Already, during the war, American forces had used some locations in Micronesia. Despite earlier professions of “no territorial aggrandizement,” a policy to which the Department of State adhered, there were planners in the U.S. Navy who were in favor of outright acquisition of the islands. Operational facilities were set up and used, with the legalistic justification that this “would make it easier to move toward internationalization of military establishments if and when the Security Council actually demonstrated that it could be relied upon to maintain the peace.”
President Harry Truman’s Secretary of State Dean Acheson, in his much-debated National Press Club speech of January 12, 1950, frankly attested to the fact of American predominance in the Pacific by defining a “defensive perimeter” around most of it (Slide 18). The Acheson Line, which might be thought of strategically as a westward extension of the older American concept of “Hemisphere Defense,” stretched from the Aleutians southward to include the main islands of Japan, for whose military defense the United States now assumed responsibility, and the Ryukyus, and also the Philippines, which in 1946 had gained independence. “So far as the military security of other areas in the Pacific is concerned,” Acheson stated, “it must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack. But it must also be clear that such a guarantee is hardly necessary within the realm of practical statesmanship. [This is an awkwardly worded sentence. What it does meaningfully reflect, perhaps, is Acheson’s assumption of American power. That is, that U.S. predominance in the Pacific Ocean area was such that anyone’s challenging it would be “impractical.”] Should such an attack occur—one hesitates to say where such an armed attack could come from—the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it and then upon the commitments of the entire civilized world under the
Charter of the United Nations which so far has not proved a weak reed to lean on by any people who are determined to protect their independence against outside aggression. But it is a mistake, I think, in considering Pacific and Far Eastern problems to become obsessed with military considerations.” Noteworthily, both Korea and Formosa were left outside the Acheson Line, and arguably presented a temptation for a potential aggressor—a “green light,” it has been charged. (A “lesson” for diplomacy here is the risk involved in being too explicit in public about the scope of a nation’s interests, and the prioritizing of them. Acheson’s statements did accurately reflect the strategy discussed and approved in the National Security Council. His lawyerly habits of precise thinking and oral articulation got the better of him. There is merit in diplomacy ambiguity, and this generally has been a characteristic of U.S. Far Eastern policy.)

The June 25, 1950, North Korean attack, with Soviet encouragement, on South Korea, which President Truman quickly decided to defend, converted Acheson’s “defensive perimeter” into an “arc of containment”—a word and concept given currency by the diplomat George F. Kennan serving then head of the State Department Policy Planning Staff (Slide 19). This arc, closer to mainland China than the “perimeter” line, came to encompass not only the Republic of
Korea and the Republic of China, based on Formosa, but also, when the conflict in Indochina heated up and the French withdrew in 1954, the Republic of Vietnam as well. This was a major geostrategic switch—a kind of Gestalt switch. Somewhat like an umbrella being turned inside out. A convex (primarily defensive) “perimeter” line became inverted into to a concave (potentially offensive) “containment” line.

The United States government, although Secretary of State John Foster Dulles did not sign the Geneva agreement (Slide 20), which divided Vietnam administratively in two zones, or choose even to shake hands with the Chinese communist emissary Chou En-Lai, indicated that the United States would not upset the agreement. The administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower did, however, give direct support to the government of Ngo Dinh Diem in the southern half of Vietnam.
In order further to contain the spread of communism, in Asia as well as in Europe, but to do so within a concept of international order—namely, “collective security” or, more accurately, “collective self-defence” as recognized in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter—Secretary Dulles took the lead in forming what came to be the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), based on the Manila Pact of September 8, 1954. SEATO was often presented, somewhat misleadingly, as an Asia-Pacific version of NATO—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which was the main part of a U.S.-centered system of security arrangements (Slide 21). The Manila Pact’s obligations were weaker than those of the transatlantic alliance, however. The commitments were not fully reciprocal, with an attack on one in the Pacific not being considered an attack on all as stated in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. SEATO’s slightly lower level of commitment was broadly acceptable, however, and it did create a sense of solidarity, and also economic-development expectation, for the area. In an accompanying “Pacific Charter” the delegates at Manila in 1954 expressed their countries’ determination not only “to prevent or counter by appropriate means any attempt in the treaty area to subvert their freedom or destroy their sovereignty and territorial integrity” but also a willingness “to cooperate in the economic, social and cultural fields in order to promote higher living standards.”
These principles were tested when in the 1960s the United States of America became involved in war in Vietnam, a debilitating and ultimately futile if, for many, an idealistic effort (Slide 22). Although the Republic of Vietnam was only a “Protocol” state and not a SEATO member, the Manila Pact nonetheless was invoked for its defense, and many countries, including Australia, contributed—for a time. So costly, and morally draining too, was the conflict for the United States that, with the election of Richard M. Nixon to the Presidency in November 1968, and his selection of Henry Kissinger as National Security Adviser, a conceptual change in American policy occurred (Slide 23).
Geopolitics replaced Wilsonianism—an outlook that George Kennan had criticized as “legalism-moralism.” Altered, too, was the sense of American power. No longer, it was decided officially, could the United States afford to fight “two-and-a-half” wars—that is, two major conflicts and a smaller regional one, as in the Middle East or in Southeast Asia. Henceforth it would plan on the basis of a “one-and-a-half” war strategy, with the Soviet Union clearly being the primary adversary—and China, not. The result—a truly extraordinary event in American diplomatic history—was the trip of Richard Nixon, an inveterate southern Californian Republican anti-communist—to China (Slide 24).
The remarkable Shanghai Communique of February 28, 1972, contained parallel statements of each side’s principles. Together, the two parties stated that “neither should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and each is opposed to efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony.” Unmistakably, the words were aimed at the Soviet Union, with which the United States, with the diplomatic leverage it gained in China, was able to use in negotiating major arms control and other agreements. Such was the logic, as well as actual proof, of “triangular diplomacy.” Perhaps most importantly for the United States at that time, Nixon and Kissinger were able, having somewhat detached both Beijing and Moscow from each other and also from Hanoi, to conclude with the North Vietnamese government an agreement for an orderly U.S. military withdrawal from Indochina (Slide 25).
Through imaginative, purposeful, and energetic diplomacy, a *peaceful* power transition had occurred. To be sure, serious concessions—“huge, painful adjustments”—were made by both sides, and by all parties involved, including particularly the South Vietnamese government. Yet international order was maintained.
The Partnerships Era

The third, present period—that of Partnerships (rather than new formal alliances)—in the Asia Pacific is premised on multipolarity. It is now not only states—governments—whose power is being expressed, and recognized. Major international corporations, too, are players. Populations themselves are asserting their influence—“people power,” a force that U.S. diplomacy, with its emphasis on democracy, has helped to make triumphant. Perhaps the best example still is the power transition that occurred, without significant violence, in the Philippines in 1986 (Slide 26). The U.S. ambassador in Manila at the time was Stephen W. Bosworth, later the Dean of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, who recently passed away.
The very agenda of U.S. foreign policy changed in the Partnerships era. New fields of policy were prominently addressed, as illustrated by the leading involvement of Americans, notably Elliot Richardson, collaborating closely with Singapore’s Tommy Koh, in negotiating the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Slide 27). Although the United States (shamefully) has not yet ratified the UNCLOS text, it adheres to most of its provisions, and uses it as a basis of principle for maintaining its and others’ interests in the maritime sphere, including the South China Sea. U.S. diplomacy in the economic domain also has been, when possible, proactive and inclusive, as demonstrated by the creation during the U.S. presidency of Bill Clinton of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping (Slide 28).
In the environmental field, too, the United States has been a diplomatic leader. Vice President Al Gore played a prominent role in bringing about the Kyoto Protocol which began the continuing, and increasingly successful diplomatic process of responding to global climate change (Slide 29).
That process continued through the 2009 Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen to the recent 2015 Conference in Paris, which produced a major global agreement. Among the persons who, working diplomatically and mostly behind the scenes, made the Paris agreement possible was the U.S. Special Envoy for Climate Change, Todd Stern, who worked intimately with his Chinese counterpart for years. Again, diplomacy and collaboration made a difference.
Relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China are being conducted on many levels, including the presidential level, and across a very broad front, through the joint mechanisms of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (Slide 30). The United States also engages “multilaterally” in group meetings with ASEAN member countries (Slide 31).
Barack Obama, who as president has traveled to the Asia-Pacific region ten times, has himself joined in these encounters. Born in Hawaii, he spent part of his early childhood in Indonesia, and even today considers the Pacific his home. Speaking before the Australian Parliament in Canberra on November 17, 2011, he declared: the United States “is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay.” In that important address he outlined a broader shift of American policy interest—the much-discussed “rebalancing” of U.S. forces, the so-called pivot, toward Asia. This is a strong indication of the future direction of America’s security commitments, including its cooperation with Australia (Slide 32).
This sphere of U.S. security responsibility is centered operationally at the U.S. Pacific Command in Hawaii (Slide 33).
For the actual diplomacy of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region today, the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM), now held by Admiral Harry Harris, has a major role—as the U.S. Navy, particularly, has had in the extended Pacific theater for decades. Admiral Harris described the scope of his power and his mandate in a speech in Singapore earlier this year: “We’re made up of nearly 400,000 personnel—Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard and Department of Defense civilians—who stand in watch over half the Earth: from Hollywood to Bollywood . . . and penguins to polar bears.”
He and other American officials as well, including Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, have presented the expanded role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region and also Indian Ocean region in principled terms—that is, supporting international order, not just protecting U.S. national interests (Slide 34). In a joint press conference in Singapore with Admiral Harris and Admiral John Richardson, the Chief of Naval Operations, Secretary Carter recalled that Americans “have long contributed to this region’s diplomatic, economic and security affairs.” He emphasized again that “the United States and many others in the Asia-Pacific are working together to build a principled security network to ensure that every nation can continue to rise and prosper.” The Rebalance, he said, is “a critical ingredient of our overall policy.” This he described as “supporting principle networks” which, “by expanding the reach of all,” represents “the next wave of Asia-Pacific security.”

The central “principle” to which Secretary Carter referred was, of course, that of the “peacefulness, lawfulness, and freedom of the common”—the maritime space, including areas of the South China Sea where Beijing has asserted Chinese claims and has been building facilities. Carter forcefully reiterated “America’s determination to fly, sail or operate wherever international law allows.” Without being belligerent, he advised that “action of a provocative
nature by any of the claimants” should be avoided. Issues that had arisen “should be dealt with peacefully and according to international law.” That is why, as he explained, the United States and other countries in the region “support the process—including reference under UNCLOS to an arbitral tribunal—to try to resolve these issues as they should be in a lawful, peaceful way.”

Slide 35

The U.S. government’s effort to build and maintain a rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific region is historic and it is broad-gauged. It is manifested not only in its security policy but also in its economic policy, notably its proposal, in which Australia played an originating role as well as a founder of APEC, for creating a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (Slide 35). The TPP effort has been a highly complex one—a “two-level game,” played necessarily both on the international, or diplomatic, table and on the national, or domestic-politics, table. Against heavy odds, the effort has resulted in negotiation of an actual agreement, with the Trade Representative Michael Froman managing the process for the United States. The outcome of the deliberation, now shifted to the domestic level in the United States, may have global consequences. The relatively high standards of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA), with its labor and environmental protections, could set the pattern for the future of the
world’s trade regime. The TPPA, though a success for American diplomacy, is encountering strong resistance among some vested interests, and even a “popular” backlash, within the United States itself—owing in part to the dynamics of the current presidential campaign, to end on Tuesday, November 8. President Obama, who sees American “leadership” in the Asia Pacific being at stake in the TPPA debate, hopes that its wider significance will be duly realized, and that he will be able to secure sufficient bipartisan support in Congress to win its approval, before he leaves office.

He and his larger vision for the Asia-Pacific region are being strongly challenged internationally as well, principally by China with its assertive military and naval posturing and also its economic policies, including its leading in forming an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which already has 57 members and surely will have more to come. Even some close allies of the United States, including next-door Canada, have indicated their readiness to join the AIIB. Conceivably, in my view, it might prove to be wise for the United States to consider joining as well, within an implicit “package,” however, of a larger, and principled, transpacific understanding, covering the disputed maritime realm as well. Thus the Chinese would have to participate, in the Belfer Center researchers’ terms, with a “huge, painful adjustment in attitudes and action,” of their own.
The recent Group of Twenty (G20) Summit Meeting in Hangzhou, with President Xi Jinping serving as host, was a symbol of China’s new world prominence (Slide 36). For President Obama, that occasion was challenging. It had awkward moments for him diplomatically, and also substantively (as during his meeting on the sidelines with Russian President Vladimir Putin in which Syria and cybersecurity were discussed). It should not be forgotten, however, that it was—historically—the United States during the Presidency of George W. Bush that in 2009 organized and held the first “Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy.” This initiated the G20 Summit Meeting sequence and process. It is a network. It is a partnership. It is a diplomatic process, in which some 19 national leaders plus the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission participated personally in the discussions at Hangzhou. In addition, 8 national leaders attended the meeting as guests. And 8 leaders of international organizations, including the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, also were there. In the Communiqué issued at the end, this statement was made: “We believe that closer partnership and joint action by G20 members will boost confidence in, foster driving forces for and intensify cooperation on global economic growth, contributing to shared prosperity and better well-being of the world.” To the extent that the present leadership of China genuinely accepts this wider partnership, the historic American example of a rapidly rising power supporting rules-based cooperation—an “open door” for everyone, and for their ideas as well as for their products and their investments—China’s rise, too, could contribute to the peace of the Asia-Pacific region. The test may be in its diplomacy, just as American diplomacy was tested, severely at times.

John Hay, were he alive today, in 2016, and able to view the competitive situation in the Asia Pacific, as he did in 1899 and 1900, and to contemplate the American role in framing an “order” for the region, he would be, I think, sufficiently well pleased by what he sees.