

China, India and the US Rebalance to the Asia Pacific: The Geopolitics of Rising Identities

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ABSTRACT

The US rebalance to the Asia Pacific is consistently interpreted as a response to China's material rise. While not entirely incorrect, this assumption – derived from an overriding faith in the explanatory significance of relative state capabilities – fails to explain why rapidly rising others, most notably India, remain absent from regional US security discourse, and why a heavy US presence in Asia predates China's ascent of the 1970s onwards. To address these problems and offer an improved explanation of what the rebalance is, how and why it has come about, and what it is designed to achieve within the context of China's rise, this analysis draws from critical geopolitics and postcolonial theory. It argues that the rebalance is best conceived as the (re)articulation of historical discourses which construct certain foreign Others like China as challenges to the ontological American self, making the rebalance an attempt to pacify a particular rising identity as much as a rising state actor. The analysis is motivated in part by the question of how the rebalance is enabled in its current form. From here, the article addresses an increasing yet regressive tendency of International Relations theory to deny studies of the 'how possible' explanatory value, encouraging their marginalisation in favour of examinations into 'why' political decisions are made.

Introduction: Debating the Rebalance

Announced in 2011, the US rebalance (formerly the 'pivot') to the Asia Pacific is multi-faceted, with political, economic, and security dimensions. Its stated purpose is to redirect resources and attention to a region considered increasingly vital to American interests, by intensifying US involvement in organisations and institutions such as the Association of South East Asian Nations and the East Asia Summit; deepening US economic influence in the region through such arrangements as the Trans-Pacific Partnership; and reasserting and strengthening security agreements with Australia, the Philippines, Japan, and others. The rebalance is a significant element of long-term US foreign policy, and 'an effort to preserve "hegemony light" in the face of an unprecedented shift in global power from West to East'.¹

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While the rebalance is complex and wide-ranging, the effects of China's rapid ascent since the late 1970s are such that it, more than any other single actor, lies at the heart of Washington's decision to 'pivot' to Asia. In the relevant International Relations (IR) literature this is where the focus typically falls and the rebalance is consistently interpreted primarily as a response to China's rise. Analyses are also commonly framed by realist-informed conceptions of power as the (economic and military) attributes of states; as a new competitor rises, the logic goes, the dominant power responds by defending its position.² For example, Logan asserts that "the main factor driving Washington's interest in the region is the growing economic and military power of the People's Republic of China".³ "There is no doubt that the pivot was motivated by concerns over China's growing power, influence, and behavior in the Asia-Pacific",⁴ argues Swaine. For Satake and Ishihara, "there is no question that the rise of China is the largest part of the Obama Administration's rebalance to the Asia-Pacific".⁵ While in certain respects valid and useful, and while the importance of China's expanding physical presence cannot be dismissed, such faith in the explanatory significance of shifts in relative state capability is problematic and limiting.

A key problem is that Americans and their policymakers do not fear the rise of every large nation relative to the United States or respond in identical ways. Alongside China for example, India is recognised to be generating "a major shift in regional security dynamics".⁶ Yet, the notion of an 'India threat' is essentially non-existent in US security discourse. This absence, moreover, goes largely unquestioned throughout the literature. China's economic and military assets are by most measures greater than India's. However, in 1995 China's economy was third largest in the world, accounting for around 6 percent of global GDP⁷ and its rise was already generating concern in the United States. Today, India's economy is third largest in the world and also accounts for 6 percent of global GDP. It is nuclear-armed (and, unlike China, a non-signatory to the UN Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons) and boasts more aircraft carriers than China. Yet, its rise is met with comparative calm. Furthermore, since the US economy now accounts for a smaller proportion of world GDP than in 1995 (23 percent then compared to 19 percent now),⁸ India's capabilities ostensibly make it a more significant competitor now than was 'threatening' China of the mid-1990s.

A second problem is that to justify analysis of the rebalance as a response to China's rise, its origins must be traced to concerns over China's material growth. However, the United States has sustained a heavy presence throughout the Asia Pacific since long before the beginnings of China's rise, in the absence of the factors now cited as responsible for the policy. It could be argued that its 'original' rebalance to Asia was in response to a material competitor of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Soviet Union. Yet

independent from its physicalities the communist Soviet Union (and indeed China, which posed some level of danger to American security from the early 1950s but which for decades represented the so-called 'sick man of Asia') was powerfully conceived as threatening to the United States' democratic, anti-communist identity.⁹ In any case, the disappearance of the Soviet 'threat' in 1989 did not prompt a mass US withdrawal from Asia. Together, these problems suggest that the forces which drive and underpin the rebalance are more complex and less analytically convenient than asserted elsewhere.

The first aim of this article is to resolve these interconnected problems, to enable a more satisfactory understanding of what the rebalance is, how and why it has come about, and what it is designed to achieve, particularly within the context of China's much-debated rise. From a framework built around critical geopolitics and postcolonial theory, it is argued that, rather than merely a reaction to shifting patterns of material power in a self-evident Asia Pacific (from West to East or from the US to China), the rebalance is more meaningfully recognised as the (re)articulation of geopolitical discourses which have always constructed the reality of an Asia Pacific and its constituent actors. The importance of China's contemporary rise cannot be dismissed, but it is shown that these discourses ensure the United States has always been especially prone to assessing its security in ontological terms, so that historical determinations of threat have arisen not simply from calculations of relative state power, but from interpretations of the extent to which certain foreign Others have challenged the meaning and purpose of the American self. Ultimately, this makes today's rebalance less a response to China's *rise* than to *China's* rise, designed to contain and pacify a particular rising identity as much as a rising state actor.

In light of this first aim the analysis is directed in part by 'how possible' rather than traditional 'why', questions. Why questions seek to explain why decisions and policies are made within social realities which are assumed and given.¹⁰ The existing IR literature on the rebalance is guided largely by this form of enquiry; the apparent objectivities of the United States, like those of all international actors, are taken for granted and the US is said to be responding to (among other things) the challenges a newly powerful China brings. While this mode of analysis is not without value, it has left unresolved the problems outlined above. How questions problematise 'objective' realities to expose forms of power why questions overlook. Their focus is the constitutive function of discursive as well as material power, and the claims to knowledge and truth attached to both the world and its subjectivities. As a result, they are better equipped to explain how political practices which appear problematic or even contradictory through the lens of 'why' frameworks, such as those of the rebalance aimed at centralising and disciplining rising China while embracing rising India can appear logical and even necessary, while potential alternatives such as those which might

acknowledge dangers in the rise of others like India or even precipitate a gradual withdrawal from the Asia Pacific can be readily dismissed.¹¹

With such analyses proliferating within IR however, the secondary aim of this article is to contribute to these theoretical debates by addressing an unhelpful tendency to conceptually dislocate ‘how’ from ‘why’ questions. While proponents of each may hold ontologically irreconcilable views on the social construction of reality, informing on how policies are enabled in a linguistically manufactured world is not a complete barrier to enhancing our understanding of why decisions behind those policies are made. Denying this link has disciplinary consequences, by perpetuating a misleading conviction that the more ‘critical’ approaches to the field terminally lack explanatory value. Demonstrating that the US rebalance to the Asia Pacific is steered by the perceived need to meet the challenge of a rising Other informs on the availability of political practice (‘how’), but also in certain important respects on motivations and purpose (‘why’).

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides a critically driven genealogy of the US rebalance to the Asia Pacific by tracing its discursive logic through American history, development, and identity beyond today’s rise of China to enduring rituals of the American self. The third section examines the contemporary manifestation of these rituals through a systematic discourse analysis of government statements on the rebalance between 2011 and 2015, in the pursuit of a more satisfactory empirical understanding of the policy as well as an improved theoretical appreciation of the explanatory contributions of the type of ‘how possible’ framework it adopts. The paper concludes by calling for a broader paradigm shift, from the study of rising powers to that of rising identities and the dynamics they share with dominant international actors. While increasingly crowded, this area of study has been comparatively slow to accommodate such forces as identity, discourse, and specialisation which the wider discipline has steadily adopted into its mainstream.

A Genealogy of the Rebalance: Geopolitics, Postcolonialism, and the Politics of Identity

Logan, Swaine, Ross and others examine the US rebalance to the Asia Pacific in an unproblematic world in which the United States is responding to a self-evidently rising China. Yet these actors are not self-evident or unproblematic. Their realities (as threatening, benevolent, cooperative and so on) are subjectively defined, and socially and imaginatively constructed. Like the world they inhabit they are discursively specialised or geo-graphed.¹² The Asia Pacific for example was imagined into existence as recently as the 1970s, through the agglomeration of East and South East Asia.¹³ Peoples and places, moreover, are Othered from understandings of the self and *for* the self, with

China historically existing in uncivilised, idealised, and anachronistic forms, among others, from the vantage point of the necessarily more ‘civilised’, ‘Enlightened’, ‘technological’ United States.¹⁴ This makes the relationship between self and Other inherently co-constitutive; “identity is constituted in relation to difference and [d]ifference is constituted in relation to identity”.¹⁵

The United States’ contemporary geographical claims to the Asia Pacific, then, like all claims, are geopolitical because they inscribe Others with meanings which determine how they should be dealt.¹⁶ Discourse is thus not simply descriptive but performative in that it produces the effects that it names,¹⁷ fabricating global territories as sites of interest and material power. “Although often assumed to be innocent... geography [is]... a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy and administer space”.¹⁸

In asking ‘how’ the rebalance is being enabled in its current form, the claim here is not that direct causal lines can be convincingly drawn between selected discourses and the implementation of policy. As Doty observes, the explanations of why questions are incomplete because they tend to take for granted the possibility that particular courses of action can happen, by presupposing the backgrounds of discursive meaning so central to that process. Asking ‘how’ is thus to examine how certain meanings are produced and attached to social subjects, creating discursive environments within which practices are made possible and others are precluded.¹⁹ The aim here then is to expose the discursive conditions which make ostensibly problematic or contradictory policies around the rebalance possible and which, as noted above, more traditional paradigms have difficulty explaining, through an analysis of the political history of the production of truth and knowledge about the ‘realities’ of China, the United States, India, and so on. It is to undermine the problematic self-evidences of the existing literature by revealing how rituals of power arise, take shape, gain importance, and affect contemporary politics.²⁰ In tracing the genealogy of the rebalance, then, the expectation is not to locate its physical ‘origin’ in the rise of China, the Cold War or elsewhere. It is to explore the constitution of its knowledges through a ‘history of the present in terms of its past’, to show how ‘the present has become logically possible’.²¹

Throughout US history, American expansionism has been less a policy than a mode of being. Nation-states have consistently exhibited expansionist tendencies, particularly those with the most land and resources. However, brought into existence not by a people of common race or religion but by disparate groups from all over the world, the US has arguably to a unique extent always been forced to bind itself according to a set of defining ideals and values, such as democracy, freedom, and liberty and, crucially, by the knowledge that these values are universal.²² “Only in a country where it is so

unclear what is American do people worry so much about the threat of things ‘un-American’.”²³ Thus, the United States was born a ‘redeemer nation’, with an inherent duty to export its identity for the global good.²⁴ From the base of 13 originally colonies on the eastern seaboard, Thomas Jefferson’s ‘Empire of Liberty’ was expected to civilise the continent: “Where this progress will stop no-one can say. Barbarism ... will in time, I trust, disappear from the Earth”.²⁵ It could be argued that this remains an especially powerful and persuasive myth within the United States today because, unlike the imperial powers of Europe in particular, the US quickly gained its own North American empire and never lost it.

The barbarism Jefferson had first in mind was of course that of Native Americans, and in its conflicts with them the US worked to secure and inflate both its physical and ontological boundaries. Assessments of national security, indeed, are heavily imbued with considerations of identity. “Ontological security is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice”.²⁶ Ontological difference primes an identity to the possibility of aggression,²⁷ and with the American self defined by powerful ideas and values it has always correspondingly maintained highly value-driven conceptions of security.

The desire to expand and seize resources was certainly a motivating drive, but the US does not invade every country over which it boasts superiority. Foreign Others are constructed in such ways as to make the application of American power contingent upon understandings of who to invade and who not.²⁸ While it could have captured (and still could capture) some or all of Canada for example, this was precluded by discursive regulations of mainstream debate.²⁹ Discursive mechanisms can establish ‘truths’ which dictate the boundaries of political possibility by making it all but impossible to think beyond them.³⁰ Holland argues that discourses achieve such a controlling effect over foreign policy by becoming conceivable, resonant, and dominant and nullifying oppositional voices.³¹ Discourses, indeed, can become naturalised statements of fact,³² or common sense, a form of knowledge which goes unchallenged from the assumption that it reflects reality.³³

Native Americans were no credible threat to US survival, but by their existence *as* Native Americans and the largely uncontested ideas by which they were defined, they challenged the core tenets of its identity. Moreover, they were not passive constructions of an Enlightened American self. The two were co-constitutive, with the ‘uncivilised’ former active in the (re)affirmation of the more ‘civilised’ latter as it advanced across the continent. Explains Trachtenberg: “In this ‘progress’, this proof of ‘America’, the profoundest role was reserved not for the abundance of land but for the fatal presence of the Indian... ‘Civilization’ required a ‘savagery’ against which to distinguish itself”.³⁴

US expeditions beyond its western coastal borders were a “logical outcome of the nation’s march to the Pacific”,³⁵ with understandings of potential material gain still functions of a unique interpretive lens. For instance, in 1842 Britain forced China to lift restrictions on foreign trade and Beijing reluctantly signed an ‘unequal treaty’. Two years later, and despite the US being founded upon the rhetoric of self-determination and anti-imperialism, Washington secured an identical agreement. Thus while nineteenth-century China represented an economic opportunity for the United States, that ‘opportunity’ existed in the imagination of the American self, for the American self.³⁶ Japan was similarly opened up in 1854, and when the US occupied the Philippines from around the turn of the twentieth century Americans’ experiences with Native Americans and Mexicans provided the operational framework for civilisation to be brought to the ‘uncivilised’ Filipinos.³⁷

While peoples and places are Othered according to understandings about the self however, identity cannot be essentialised to the point where it identifiably ‘exists’, as positivists and some constructivists suggest.³⁸ The fluidity of discourse has thus allowed the US to redefine itself over time as (combinations of) ‘White’, ‘Enlightened’, ‘anti-communist’, etc. The significance of Others as ‘non-White’, ‘exotic’ ‘communist’, etc., have correspondingly evolved.³⁹ During the early Cold War when the US first embedded itself in East Asia, the Others to which it responded challenged the American self in different ways than before. As already noted however, the ‘threats’ were equally manufactured.

US officials considered a Soviet attack unlikely and, in any case, the danger it posed was not considered primarily of the military. The Soviet Union was not a threatening actor which happened to be communist. In large part it was threatening *because* it was communist, and a challenge to America’s self-proclaimed status as leader of the ‘free world’. Communism endangered the very being of America, with its apparent threat to US private ownership code for distinguishing ‘civilised’ from ‘savage’.⁴⁰ In 1949 the National Security Council argued that China was unable to threaten the US for a ‘generation or more’.⁴¹ Following its communist revolution later that year however ‘Red China’ joined the Soviet Union as an imminent danger. Simultaneously, Taiwan became a recipient of American protection. A member of the ‘free world’, Taiwan was anti-democratic and authoritarian until martial law was lifted in 1987. Yet because Taiwan, like China, is unknowable outside of the discourses which sustain it, this was largely irrelevant. How the United States could logically invest in the security of an anti-democratic island of which few Americans had heard is explained only by its status as an imaginative geography attributed meaning by the anti-communist American self.⁴²

The triumph of communism in 1970s Vietnam inflicted no significant adverse effects on US security. Yet, Washington spent \$170 billion dollars⁴³

and almost 50,000 American lives trying to defeat it.⁴⁴ With no strategic or economic value to the conflict there America's involvement makes little sense without recourse to the role of representational power which molded the 'reality' that such costs were necessary. Rituals of discursive power arose, took shape, gained importance and affected contemporary politics from the 'truth' that Vietnam, "the frontier of freedom",⁴⁵ was a critical site of American power.

At this point it is worth noting that centralising discourse to foreign policy analysis is not to deny the existence of an external world, reduce reality to the domain of language or dismiss the importance of material properties. It is to say that the material world exists within, and as a function of, discourse, since this is our primary means of making sense of it. The meanings we draw from actors are filtered through lenses coloured by the biases, expectations and experiences identities bring. Contemporary China is more physically able than before to exert harm. However the China 'threat' to US security is traced as clearly to the fears and sensitivities of American identity as to Beijing's physical attributes. The US rebalance to the Asia Pacific, like the world around it, does not exist outside of discourse but is constituted by it.

Rituals of discursive power still operate today, as evidenced by tracing the rebalance not to the beginnings of a realpolitik saga when the US physically established itself across the region, but through the constitution of knowledges of foreign Others and the ontological security-seeking practices of the American self. At the centre of these practices remain the (subjectively defined) values of democracy, freedom and liberty, and their securitisation for national survival. To demonstrate these assertions, this conceptual framework provides escape from the kinds of problems highlighted in the introduction which emanate from a traditional faith in the explanatory value of shifts in material power in a seemingly self-evident world. It presents the opportunity instead to explore the geopolitical claims to power which continue to frame and regulate the potentialities of policy. As Ó Tuathail explains, the act of geo-graphing defined the colonial period, but "the struggle between centralizing states and authoritative centers, on the one hand, and rebellious margins and dissident cultures, on the other hand, is still with us".⁴⁶ The contemporary discursive logic of these claims to power is now examined through a systemic analysis of US government statements on the rebalance, to address the key silences of the literature identified at the outset.

Revisiting the Rebalance

Research Design

In her analysis of 1950s American military intervention in the Philippines, Doty examines not *why* the US intervened, but *how* powerful textual mechanisms created a world in which it could act against its self-defined status as a promoter

of sovereignty and postcolonial equality. Counterinsurgency was enabled from the ‘truth’ that ‘vulnerable’ and ‘uninformed’ Filipinos required the help of the ‘moral’ and ‘benevolent’ United States. The techniques of predication, presupposition and subject positioning made Washington’s activities appear logical, necessary and in line with the values of American identity.⁴⁷

Predicates are descriptive characteristics such as ‘weak’, ‘ideological’, ‘engages in noble causes’, etc. Underlying clusters of predicates are broader presuppositions in the form of binary oppositions, such as ‘good/evil’, which provide a convenient method of distinguishing self from Other. Subject positioning orders subjects hierarchically, enabling ‘stronger’, ‘morally superior’ actors to engage in practices made uncontroversial by the ‘weakness’ or ‘disruptiveness’ of others.⁴⁸ This was in part how America’s self-harming war in Vietnam was made possible for example, as “once again [Americans] embarked upon a heroic... conquest of an inferior race”.⁴⁹

As already established, the existing literature on the US rebalance to Asia is bound by a common understanding of the ‘why’: the United States is rebalancing to Asia (at least in part) because of the physical rise of China and the challenges its capabilities bring. Yet Americans do not fear the rise of every significant state actor or respond in identical ways, and the US presence across the region predates China’s meteoritic growth. An understanding of the ‘how possible’ addresses these problems, from an analysis of how the discursive and representational processes (or rituals) of the American self examined so far enable policies for which the more traditional paradigms have difficulty accounting. In doing so, the discursive logic of today’s rebalance can be traced beyond the contemporary rise of China through American history, development, and identity.

To conduct this analysis, the fifteen fullest government articulations of the rebalance, between October 2011 when the policy was announced and April 2015, were collected. These can be seen in [Table 1](#) below. The statements were authored by the Department of State (six), the White House (five), and the Department of Defense (four). Two were released in 2011; two in 2012; seven in 2013; three in 2014; and one in 2015. This sample represents the three key dimensions of the rebalance (military, economic and diplomatic) described in the introduction, and reflects a relative proliferation of governmental rhetoric on the policy throughout 2013.⁵⁰

Government statements on the rebalance are highly choreographed and it could be argued that they artificially simplify the complex landscape of international affairs merely to legitimise policy to the wider public. This is a valid concern. However, a lack of discursive sophistication should not be interpreted as a sign of detachment from the ‘real’ world of policy formulation and enactment. The United States’ recent War on Terrorism operated according to imaginary divisions between good and evil, ‘us’ and ‘them’, which became so powerful and compelling precisely because of their binary and accessible

Table 1. Key government statements on the rebalance, October 2011–April 2015.

Date	Department (author)	Statement number/title
11-Oct-11	State (Hillary Clinton)	(1) 'America's Pacific Century'
17-Nov-11	W. House (Barack Obama)	(2) 'Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament'
02-Jun-12	Defense (Leon Panetta)	(3) 'The US Rebalance Towards the Asia-Pacific: Leon Panetta'
01-Aug-12	Defense (Ash Carter)	(4) 'Deputy Secretary of Defense Speech'
26-Jun-13	State (Joseph Yun)	(5) 'The Rebalance to Asia: Why South Asia Matters (Part 1)'
13-Mar-11	W. House (Tom Donilon)	(6) 'The United States and the Asia-Pacific in 2013'
12-Apr-13	W. House	(7) 'Fact Sheet: The Fiscal Year 2014 Federal Budget and the Asia-Pacific'
15-Apr-13	State (John Kerry)	(8) 'Remarks on a 21st Century Pacific Partnership'
21-Nov-13	W. House (Susan Rice)	(9) 'Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice'
16-Dec-13	State (B. of Public Affairs)	(10) 'The East Asia-Pacific Rebalance: Expanding U.S. Engagement'
18-Dec-13	State (Scot Marciel)	(11) 'Economic Aspects of the Asia Rebalance'
04-Nov-14	State (John Kerry)	(12) 'Remarks on U.S.-China Relations'
15-Nov-14	W. House (Barack Obama)	(13) 'Remarks by President Obama at the University of Queensland'
30-Sep-14	Defense (Robert O. Work)	(14) 'Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work on the Asia-Pacific Rebalance'
06-Apr-15	Defense (Ash Carter)	(15) 'Remarks on the Next Phase of the U.S. Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific'

nature.⁵¹ As we have seen here, since the beginnings of US history constructions of self and Other (civilised vs uncivilised, democracy vs non-democracy, etc.) have rationalised acts of American internationalism by bringing an uncomplicated framework for action to an inconveniently complicated world.

Government statements on the rebalance are also not considered here to present definitive constructions of either the US self or foreign Others since understandings of identities are always subjectively contested. They are also likely to obscure the varying and even 'real' opinions of those (possibly numerous, unnamed) individuals who contribute to them. Nonetheless, and as will be shown, they reveal patterns of geopolitical discourse which extend across key departments of Washington's foreign policy machinery, framing understandings of 'what' China, India, the United States, and so on represent. These patterns are then not only seen to be active in enabling the rebalance to Asia in its current form, but consistent with some of the most powerful discourses, texts, and worldviews so central to American internationalism of the past. Competing claims to 'truth' are not unimportant. However certain discourses become central to the policy process while others are correspondingly marginalised, and the value of the documents utilised here should not be considered in isolation from the long history of the present about which this analysis is so concerned.

From the statements utilised for this analysis, a list of recurring predicates attributed to the United States, China, India, and the Asia Pacific was generated. As each predicate emerged it was assigned a code to systematise its quantification (e.g., US as a 'Promoter of Asia Pacific peace/security' = US5, China as a 'Challenge/presents challenges' = C2, etc.). To present a

meaningful and manageable dataset, codes which appeared in three or fewer of the fifteen statements were discarded. Table 2 shows the final list of predicates, their frequencies, and the statements in which they appear:

The Geopolitics of the Rebalance: A History of the Present

As seen in Table 2, governmental discourse of the rebalance consistently (in each of the fifteen statements) constructs the US as a promoter of peace and

Table 2. Subjects and their predicates in US government statements on the rebalance, 2011–2015.

Subjects and predicates	Frequency	Statement no. (refer to Table 1)
United States		
Presence in Asia Pacific essential	4	(1)(2)(5)(6)
Promoter of Asia Pacific prosperity	13	(1)(2)(4)(5)(6)(7)(8)(9)(10)(11)(12)(14)(15)
Promoter of Asia Pacific peace/security	15	(1)(2)(3)(4)(5)(6)(7)(8)(9)(10)(11)(12)(13)(14)(15)
Pacific power/nation	9	(1)(2)(3)(6)(7)(9)(10)(14)(15)
Beneficial presence to Asia Pacific	4	(1)(2)(3)(8)
Internationalism beneficial/essential	5	(1)(8)(12)(14)(15)
Delegator of responsibilities	5	(2)(8)(9)(14)(15)
Wanted/welcomed in Asia Pacific	6	(1)(2)(5)(6)(7)(14)
Competence/leadership qualities	12	(1)(2)(3)(4)(7)(9)(10)(11)(12)(13)(14)(15)
Promoter of fairness/rules for all	12	(1)(2)(3)(4)(5)(6)(7)(8)(9)(11)(14)(15)
Promoter of human security/rights/advancement	11	(1)(2)(5)(6)(7)(8)(9)(10)(11)(12)(14)
Values/principles advanced for greater good	11	(1)(2)(3)(4)(5)(6)(7)(8)(9)(14)(15)
Military beneficial/benevolent	10	(1)(2)(3)(5)(6)(9)(10)(13)(14)(15)
Regional/global leader	6	(2)(3)(6)(12)(14)(15)
Promoter of Asia Pacific multilateralism	10	(1)(2)(3)(5)(6)(7)(8)(9)(11)(14)
China		
Beneficiary of US-led governance/rules	4	(1)(3)(4)(15)
Challenge/presents challenges	6	(1)(3)(6)(9)(14)
Must play by international rules	6	(1)(5)(8)(9)(14)(15)
Must advance/learn	5	(1)(6)(9)(12)(15)
Prosperity benefits world	4	(2)(5)(8)(14)
Need for guidance/discipline on human rights	6	(1)(2)(9)(11)(12)(14)
Need for guidance/discipline on cyber warfare/hacking	5	(6)(9)(12)(14)(15)
US-China relationship		
Different to US	6	(1)(7)(8)(9)(12)(14)
Peaceful/prosperous rise welcome	4	(2)(3)(6)(14)
US committed to work with China	9	(1)(2)(3)(6)(7)(8)(9)(12)(14)
US-China relationship mutually beneficial	6	(1)(6)(7)(8)(12)(14)
Need for US and China to live up to responsibilities	4	(2)(3)(6)(12)
US-China co-operation beneficial to world	8	(1)(6)(7)(8)(9)(12)(14)(15)
India		
Democratic	5	(1)(5)(6)(8)(14)
Contributor to peace/security	5	(1)(4)(5)(8)(9)
Beneficial to regional/global economic prosperity	5	(1)(5)(6)(8)(9)
Asia Pacific		
Has potential/maturing	8	(1)(2)(6)(7)(8)(9)(12)(15)
Opportunity for US	12	(1)(2)(3)(5)(6)(7)(9)(10)(11)(12)(14)(15)
Concerned about US withdrawal	4	(1)(2)(3)(5)

security. As with all identified predicates this has the potential to overlap with and implicate others, in this case on occasion with the ‘truth’ that an American security presence benefits regional prosperity (which alone is advanced in thirteen of the fifteen statements). Argues Clinton: American treaty alliances in Asia “have underwritten regional peace and security... shaping the environment for the region’s remarkable economic ascent”.⁵² It works too in conjunction with the US as competent, with strong leadership qualities, demonstrated by its possession of “cutting-edge capabilities”⁵³ or its commitment to not “shy away from... defending our interests, our allies, and our partners throughout the region”.⁵⁴ The intention is not to question the validity of these assertions; in many respects the US has facilitated regional security and prosperity. Rather, it is to show that these ‘truths’ are not of objective reality. They are products of, and contributors to, discursively manipulated realities which operate in the service of the United States and its practices in the region, especially within the context of a rising China.

For instance, Clinton asserts that “by virtue of our unique geography, the United States is both an Atlantic and a Pacific power”.⁵⁵ Yet there is nothing unique about US geography in this regard, since Canada, Mexico, Colombia and others also border both oceans. US geography remains political geography and inextricable from the exertion of power as its unspectacular physical contours (in this sense at least) are bestowed exceptional qualities which reinforce established notions of America’s internationalist duties. Essentially unquestioned, Clinton’s fantasised reality is apparent common sense and unproblematic. So is the ‘fact’ that US duties, necessitated by its ‘universal’ values, legitimately extend to wherever it chooses. Statements on the rebalance purposefully present the US as a ‘Pacific Power’ (or ‘nation’), but this is not merely descriptive. It is an inherently performative call to action, turning foreign problems into domestic problems by helping to ensure that the United States acts in distant Asia as naturally as Vietnam, the Philippines, and, most importantly, China.

This shows that the subject positioning between the US and China (or any other) is not performed only or even primarily at the level of relative capabilities. Scholars are right to identify the rise of China as a key motivating force behind American regional policy. But the imaginative geography of rising China means something to the American self which, notably, rising India (the next most frequently appearing actor in the statements) does not, and vice versa. Each relationship is defined by powerful presuppositions. US officials (in nine out of fifteen statements) stress that Washington is committed to working with China, and (in four out of fifteen) that China’s rise is welcomed. As Secretary of Defense Ash Carter states, “I reject the zero-sum thinking that China’s gain is our loss”.⁵⁶ Indeed, while punctuated by sites of tension contemporary US-China relations are broadly productive and cooperative. Yet just as Native Americans were both a prominent construct of

European-American identity and essential to its affirmation, the Chinese Other does much to necessitate the presence of the fantasised American self in Asia.

Statements on the rebalance do not hide this contemporised geo-graphing of the region and its actors. Indeed, they are continually set within the context of “differences” between the US and China. “We have some fundamental differences that cannot be minimized”, observes National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice.⁵⁷ Secretary of State John Kerry notes that US China policy is built on coordinating interests and managing differences, about which Washington is “clear-eyed”.⁵⁸ While these differences are rarely spelt out, to the democratic United States China’s communist structures imbue its modern-day rise with ominous connotations.⁵⁹ Ontological difference still primes the US to the possibility of aggression⁶⁰ but, to return to an earlier point, identities cannot be essentialised as definitively knowable, as the case of ‘free’ yet authoritarian Cold War Taiwan demonstrates. What matters is not so much Chinese communism as the *understanding* that Chinese communism challenges the anti-communist American self.⁶¹

To view India as a strategic counterbalance to a more materially powerful China would again not necessarily be incorrect, but incomplete nonetheless. A third of statements emphasise India’s democratic credentials which, in an identical but contrary manner to China, enables American identity and invigorates the US in the Asia Pacific. As Clinton explains, India complements rather than contradicts American values: “The Obama administration has expanded our bilateral partnership... and outlined a new vision for a more economically integrated and politically stable South and Central Asia, with India as a linchpin”.⁶² Kerry remarks: “The United States and China... have different political systems, different histories, different cultures, and... different views on certain significant issues”.⁶³ By most measures each of these also applies to the US and India. Yet here the focus is on closer ties “rooted in common values and interests”.⁶⁴ India’s rise is not simply less dramatic and quantitatively different to China’s; in American imaginations it is qualitatively so.

Naturalised discourses of the United States and its place in the world ensure that US power remains contingent upon understandings of who to invade, contain and pacify and who not. Support for India’s growth is essentially unconditional, with assessments of its rise rarely qualified. “The United States and the world benefit from a stable and prosperous China”, Kerry argues, but only a China “that assumes the responsibilities of a great power... respects the will of its people [and]... plays by the rules”.⁶⁵ The insistence that China plays by international rules appears in six statements, and in twelve statements those rules, and the fairness they promote, are identified as protectorates of the United States.

Satake and Ishirara argue that articulations of the rebalance are framed by the need for transparency from Beijing, the challenges posed by China's military, and the demand that it abides by international rules.⁶⁶ Yet those rules are not simply 'there' to be followed. In a sense they do not even exist, at least in the form typically assumed. In six statements it is argued that China requires discipline or guidance over human rights, for example – another caveat tied to acceptance of its rise. Yet no state upholds human rights to their fullest and a quarter of the Indian population is designated Scheduled Castes or Tribes.⁶⁷ These “broken people” suffer abuse, discrimination and a form of apartheid unresolved by failed legislation.⁶⁸ India also has the highest number of child labourers in the world.⁶⁹

Spacialising the world in this way encapsulates the continuing “struggle between centralizing states and authoritative centers, on the one hand, and rebellious margins and dissident cultures, on the other”⁷⁰. When China is specifically singled out as a beneficiary of “the open and rules-based system that the United States helped to build and works to sustain”,⁷¹ the responsibility falls on Beijing alone to behave or risk disciplinary measures for appearing rebellious or, in modern parlance, ‘revisionist’. As such, the US *is* concerned that China abides by international rules, but those rules are imaginary constructs made significant or not, and judged to have been complied with or not, according to the mechanics of presupposition and subject positioning. Rather than from statutes of law, in large part they emerge from ontological differentiation.

US engagement in the Asia Pacific, and by extension its internationalism, also continues to represent less a political choice than a mode of being. In a majority of statements it is argued that American values and/or principles, which Clinton asserts are the United States’ ‘most potent asset’ in the Asia Pacific, even above the military,⁷² should be exported for the greater good. Such an understanding remains a common sense statement of fact; the question is never whether the world benefits from ‘universal’ American values, only how best they are delivered. For political practice to be legitimised and for additional narratives to be rendered unthinkable, discourses dominate by nullifying opposition.⁷³ Thus when Ash Carter explains that “we must all decide if we are going to... cement our influence and leadership in the fastest-growing region in the world; or if, instead, we’re going to take ourselves out of the game”,⁷⁴ he shuts down debate over American internationalism by removing all credibility from the only apparent alternative. Together with representations of the Asia Pacific as an opportunity for the United States in twelve of the fifteen statements, little space is left for dissent.

Thus in several respects the rebalance represents modern day “proof of ‘America’”, by enhancing its presence in a region which has potential and is maturing (see [Table 2](#)) but which requires indispensable US support. Indeed,

with a familiarly unquestioned duty to internationalism persists an enduring belief in the moral right to American power and hegemony. Three quarters of statements refer to the beneficial or benevolent role of the US military in the Asia Pacific. As tellingly, as constitutive of ideas about US power and purpose China's military is envisioned as destabilising in part for being morally illegitimate. This lack of legitimacy is once again a construct of discursive design.

For example, Clinton observes that "the United States and the international community have watched China's efforts to modernize and expand its military, and we have sought clarity as to its intentions".⁷⁵ In doing so she undermines China's already uncertain relationship with the international community, but with no defined borders, membership, or qualifications for entry, that community is an imaginative geography par excellence. The American frontier once represented "the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization".⁷⁶ Now the talk is rarely about "civilization" versus "barbarism" or "savagery", but that global binary of inside/outside is embodied in such fantasised institutions as the international community of which the US is its self-appointed figurehead. Civilisation still requires a savagery against which to distinguish itself⁷⁷ and the image of a China which lacks the full standards of civilisation continues to pervade American politics.⁷⁸ Rising India, by virtue of its ontologically derived status as a "leader" of the American-led community,⁷⁹ affirms the right of the US to its preminent military position.

This is how the present – the rebalance in its current form – becomes logically possible to the point where anything beyond procedural and strategic details escapes meaningful debate. Despite broadly cooperative relations, China exists as a strategic Other of the United States, "a discursive construct from which it cannot escape".⁸⁰ Even at a time of national budget cuts, the alternative of withdrawing or downsizing the United States' 75,000-plus troops in myriad regional bases and other facilities⁸¹ is conceived as no alternative at all. As Table 2 shows, then, in the broadest sense the 'proof' of America is found in the underlying presupposition that "different" China, constructed as a real or potential revisionist, rule-breaker, security threat and so on is a challenge which can only be met by an equally imagined United States as a leader and benevolent promotor of security and prosperity.

China is neither a paragon of diplomacy or helpless victim of US aggression; its construction of new islands in disputed areas of the South China Sea for example is disruptive and unnecessarily provocative. Yet American performances of differentiation on which the rebalance relies are more than functions of China's physical rise. Familiar rituals of the American self, which establish the 'truth' that China represents an ontological antagonist of the United States and its values predate, and are independent of, China's contemporary rise. Like Native Americans, Philippine

insurgents, the Cold War Soviet Union, and others, modern-day China by its very existence *as* China both challenges and reaffirms the American self in the Asia Pacific and its highly value-driven conceptions of security.

Epilogue: On 'How' and 'Why'

Doty's distinction between 'how' and 'why' questions, outlined in the introduction, emerged from claims that social science accommodates the separate pursuits of 'explaining' (why) and 'understanding' (how). The first, associated with positivist/rationalist approaches to the field, is said 'to explain the workings of nature' through causal laws, 'treating the human realm as part of nature'.⁸² The aim is to explain why decisions are made in a world 'out there' to see. The second, associated more with so-called post-positivist schools (including critical geopolitics and postcolonialism), is said to be designed to understand 'what the events mean'.⁸³ The aim is to deconstruct apparently unproblematic realities to show how the world is a function of language and discourse and how constitutive forms of power manufacture 'truths' which frame the limits of political potentiality.

Holland rightly observes that asking 'how' instead of 'why' offers a route to exploring the formation of ideas and subjectivities and their role in legitimising policies while impeding the possibility of others.⁸⁴ Equally however, an unhealthy and overtly regressive tendency has emerged for the contributions of how and why questions to be disentangled from one another, for interrogation on an either/or basis. Addressing this trend is important as explorations of the 'how possible' increase in frequency, towards for example Britain's colonial rule over Kenya⁸⁵; European integration⁸⁶; and the United States⁸⁷ and Australia's 'Wars on Terror'.⁸⁸

As Alexander Wendt argued some time ago, "There are always two stories to tell' about international politics. Yet contained within the 'Explanation and Understanding' frame are the seeds of a more conflictual, zero-sum view". Such a view inhibits the shared goal of making sense of global affairs. Moreover, distinguishing between "explainers" and "understanders" works primarily against the "understanders" by reinforcing the notion that while those forces may be interesting and novel, they hold no explanatory value.⁸⁹ However, constitutive theories built around productive and discursive processes of power *do* provide explanations. These explanations may not be causal, "but they are explanations just the same".⁹⁰

Certainly, authors stress that addressing the 'how' does not invalidate or overrule the 'why'. Yet with the former typically conceived as "complementary"⁹¹ at best, its dismissal in favour of the still-dominant latter is justified and even encouraged.⁹² At the level of ontology opinions over whether the world exists as objective 'truth' or as a product of discursive practice may be incompatible. But to suggest that answers to the question of

how policy options are administered within socially constructed realities offer little or nothing to understandings of why those policies are implemented is to misrepresent and understate ‘critical’ or ‘interpretive’ paradigms.

Powerful rituals of American identity reveal *how* the US can centralise and counter the ‘challenges’ of rising China while the rise of India can be afforded unconditional freedom from suspicion, and *how* the notion of scaling back its regional presence and internationalism can be so unequivocally rejected. As such they speak to the regulation of political debate, but also to motivations and purpose. The conclusions of the preceding analysis, in other words, are once again more explanatory than descriptive. The explanation is not causal since the genealogy presented here reveals the persistence of highly pervasive modes of representation and their intrusions into contemporary US foreign policy, rather than the creation *de novo* of specific patterns of behaviour and a direct lineage to those of the present day. Nonetheless, it provides insight into *why* American power has always been applied in the ways that it has towards those that it has, and *why* alternative courses of action are rejected.

When Doty observes that why questions take as unproblematic the possibility that US intervention in the Philippines could happen, she takes a conceptual step back to expose how its possibility emerged. Yet political possibility does not come about dispassionately, but from the worldviews which enable it. The performativity of discourse, and the mutually constitutive power/knowledge nexus which inscribes the world with geopolitical claims to power, make courses of action available but also desirable and even imperative – in Doty’s own words, “necessary”.⁹³ In short, they act as prescriptive drivers for policy. The social construction of Filipinos as uncivilised and inferior helps us understand how political practice was enabled, but also inevitably why the decision was made for the ‘superior’ United States to intervene among ‘*uncivilised*’, ‘*inferior*’ Filipinos who could not be trusted with their own future.

Today, government statements on the rebalance help reveal both how the US is logically able to, among other things, discriminate between the physical growths and modernisations of socially constructed Others. More than this, the contours of its identity and the textual mechanisms by which those Others are understood to challenge or affirm the American self tell us why rising Others are ‘logically’ treated differently and why decisions behind the strategy are made. The US is now ‘rebalancing’ to the Asia Pacific in part because it is a ‘geographically unique’, ‘benevolent’ ‘Pacific power’ with an imagined right to hegemony in the area. China, meanwhile, specifically threatens peace and security from its place on the edge of the international community. These subjective rather than self-evident truths are motivating calls to action. Demonstrating that the rebalance is designed to contain and pacify China’s *rise* as much as

China's rise thus unavoidably points to the mutual implication of the pursuits of both 'how' and 'why'.

Sceptical of the importance of post-positivist approaches, Stephen Walt argues that "issues of war and peace are too important for the field to be diverted into a prolix and self-indulgent discourse that is divorced from the real world".⁹⁴ Yet rather than divorced from the world, discursive or productive forms of power are inextricable from it and central to the formulation of what we accept as 'real'. Productive or discursive power should not be privileged since a "range of conceptualizations [of power] provides the basis for a better, richer, and fuller understanding of the workings of world politics".⁹⁵ This is the aim of scholars no matter their epistemological 'camp'. Perpetuating a false dichotomy between 'explainers' and 'understanders', and the respective, contrasting contributions they are equipped to offer, can only be detrimental to the field.

Conclusion: From Rising Powers to Rising Identities

The US rebalance to the Asia Pacific is consistently presented as a response to the physical rise of China. While not incorrect, this explanation, which centralises the importance of shifts in relative material power, fails to account for why Americans do not fear the relative rise of all states or why a heavy US presence in the region predates China's rise. This analysis has shown that the rebalance is most meaningfully recognised not as an isolated strategy driven by contemporary assessments of a self-evident world, but as a (re)articulation of powerful geopolitical discourses which have long produced the reality of a world and the actors within it.

Four years of government statements on the rebalance reveal that China presents distinctively qualitative, rather than simply quantitative, problems for the American self. A rapidly rising India reaffirms American identity and the validity of its regional security behaviours. Like its colonisation of North America and historical experiences with notable foreign Others, US engagement in the Asia Pacific is not a function of pure material interests. Material physicalities matter, but the rebalance emerges from often unquestioned discursive conditions which necessitate its design not for the containment or pacification of a 'rising power' per se, but of an ontologically significant rising identity. In examining Western interpretations of Asia Edward Said noted that the global East has "less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world".⁹⁶ In many respects the same can be said of the US rebalance today.

From this interrogation of how today's rebalance appears logical and necessary, problems inherent to separating the question of 'how' political practices are enabled from those which examine 'why' decisions are made, can be exposed. Critical scholars are themselves guilty of reinforcing the misleading conviction that the former mode of analysis lacks explanatory

value. Yet with the rebalance motivated not only by the perceived need to respond to new capabilities but also to those of a particular Other whose existence challenges the security of the American self, interrogations of the 'how possible' are demonstrated to be more than just complementary to the 'why'. Advanced understandings of the constitution of knowledges and of the attribution of meanings further our understanding both of how political possibility is regulated and 'why' policies ultimately come about.

In broader terms than is possible to explore here, this analysis also offers a useful platform from which to suggest that traditional theories of 'rising power'- 'dominant power' relations are limited and limiting. Framed by familiarly realist assumptions of power, these theories generally expect such relationships to become hostile and conflictual as the 'capability gap' narrows; as Nye asserts, "Rapid power transitions are one of the leading causes of great power conflict".⁹⁷ John Mearsheimer argues that "power is the currency of international politics. Great powers... pay careful attention to how much economic and military power they have relative to each other".⁹⁸ Yet just like currency, the value of material power is not determined by nature. It is imaginary, even illusionary, and attributed or denied importance through social interaction.

In the case of at least one of Mearsheimer's 'great powers', careful attention is paid not just to economic and military power but to the discursively composed subjectivities of itself and Others. For this reason, in an era when the rise of new 'powers' and supposed US decline are attracting ever more attention, a move from 'rising powers' towards 'rising identities' must be considered. As above, this would not be to dismiss the importance of shifts in relative material capability. It would, however, create space for the forms of power which permeate and define material capability, shaping the realities of their shifts.

History is littered with 'power transitions' which did not result in conflict, and contemporary dynamics between the United States and rising Others are further challenging traditional expectations. With such ideational forces as discourse, identity, and representation increasingly accommodated within mainstream analyses of world affairs, it seems curious that they remain comparatively marginalised by theoretical debates over so-called rising powers. Addressing this problem would be a first step towards the "fuller understanding" of contemporary global issues called for elsewhere.⁹⁹ As this analysis indicates, this is best achieved by working to attenuate rather than promote intra-disciplinary conflict.

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