

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Lost Decade: The US Pivot to Asia and the Rise of Chinese Power.* By Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine. New York City, New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. Hardcover: 469pp.**

Since its victory in the Pacific Theatre during the Second World War, the United States has maintained an ambivalent relationship with Asia, characterized by alternating periods of heightened attention and benign neglect. This dynamic has rendered US engagement with the region a recurrent theme in foreign policy discussions for the past eight decades, evoking the perennial question: Does the United States have staying power? The two “hot wars” of the Cold War era that the United States engaged in took place in Asia—on the Korean Peninsula and in mainland Southeast Asia. Post-1989, during the “Global War on Terror”, the United States played a major role in regional security, especially in Indonesia and the Philippines. The US military presence has remained a constant in South Korea and Japan for decades, and defence ties with the Philippines have been revitalized recently.

Despite these sustained engagements, US influence in the region has been cast in doubt. The “loss” of China in 1949 after the communist takeover sparked fierce debate within Washington, while defeat in Vietnam ushered in a decade of indifference towards Southeast Asia. More recently, Washington’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a US-led free trade agreement, raised further concerns about its long-term strategic commitment to the region. The ongoing debate over America’s resolve to maintain its influence in Asia is now framed by the rise of China and the strategic competition that has come to define superpower relations. *The Lost Decade*, authored by two prominent scholars on US grand

strategy, Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine, offers a fresh perspective on this debate.

It opens by identifying five vital national interests for the United States in Asia and underscores how China is an “abiding and proximate threat” to each of them (p. 12). The authors also reaffirm a well-known but crucial point: US grand strategy has historically been Eurocentric, complicating efforts to prioritize Asia. Against this backdrop, the authors turn to the “Pivot to Asia”, the Obama administration’s signature strategy designed to reorient to the Asia Pacific—now more commonly referred to as the “Indo-Pacific”—as a priority.

Blackwill and Fontaine correctly observe that the Pivot was initially well-received throughout Washington and among America’s regional partners, generating optimism and curiosity. But, as with many ambitious strategies, the devil is in the details, and *The Lost Decade* meticulously examines the twists and turns the Pivot has taken, concluding that it flattered to deceive. As hinted by the book’s title, it ultimately failed to achieve its objectives due to a lack of coherence and issues with execution, the authors argue. By 2021, ten years after then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first announced the strategy in the pages of *Foreign Policy*, “America’s position in Asia today is weaker than when the Pivot was announced”, Blackwill and Fontaine contend (p. 3). In fact, they regard its failure as one of the three most significant US foreign policy missteps since the Second World War, alongside the escalation of the Vietnam War in 1965 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

For instance, the Obama administration demurred rather than taking a firm stance against growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Likewise, it could not secure the economic prong of the Pivot, the TPP, which Donald Trump withdrew the United States from during his first week as president in 2017. However, the authors acknowledge that any US administration might have encountered similar difficulties. Global geopolitical realities, particularly in the Middle East, presented significant obstacles. The notion that the United States could withdraw from the Middle East to fully pivot to Asia was unrealistic, as ongoing events—most recently in Gaza—underscore the persistent need for US engagement in multiple theatres simultaneously. As a superpower with global interests, the United States must be able to walk, chew gum and juggle simultaneously.

While the authors do not explicitly suggest that the Pivot’s failure facilitated China’s rise, the fact is that China’s ascension would

have occurred regardless of it. The rise of China is the defining geopolitical shift of the past three decades, and there was little Washington could have done to prevent it. Yet, any contemplation of whether the Pivot's shortcomings hastened China's rise has to be understood in that context. Indeed, the Pivot is best understood as Washington's desire to be an anchor of regional stability, while its primary objective was not to stop China's rise but to help the region manage the consequences of this. In addition to their strategic insights, Blackwill and Fontaine thoroughly analyse the operational challenges that various US administrations faced in implementing a coherent Asia strategy. They assess the varying levels of interest among key policymakers and highlight the levels of inter-agency coordination (or lack thereof) required to make elements of the strategy a reality.

The book concludes with some thoughtful, albeit predictable, recommendations for a renewed Pivot strategy. These are well-argued and warrant close reading, though two observations are warranted. The appeal for increased military spending on Asian security makes sense, though the United States' current domestic fiscal challenges and global military commitments—such as in the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel—may limit the feasibility of such investments. Indeed, the financial burden will most likely have to be shouldered by America's allies in Seoul, Tokyo, Taipei, Manila and Canberra. Furthermore, the recommendation to re-engage with regional trade initiatives is equally sound, though domestic political constraints make this unlikely in the near term. While the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) may be a step in the right direction, its limitations leave the United States at a disadvantage compared to regional actors who continue to pursue free trade and integration.

Notwithstanding this, *The Lost Decade* is thoughtful, well-researched and eminently readable, and with US-China competition intensifying and a new administration soon taking office in Washington, it is essential reading for those seeking to understand the complexities of US engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

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