

# The US foreign policy establishment and grand strategy: how American elites obstruct strategic adjustment

Christopher Layne<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** In this article, I demonstrate that there are compelling reasons why the USA should reconsider its current grand strategy—variously described as primacy or deep engagement—and, instead, adopt a less activist strategy such as offshore balancing, or restraint. The most salient reason for the USA to make a change of direction is that its current strategy has set the USA on a collision course with China. Nevertheless, the American foreign policy establishment is resistant to strategic adjustment. In this article, I offer a two-pronged explanation for this resistance. First, the American foreign policy establishment imposes a broadly uniform world view on those who comprise it. In this sense, the foreign policy establishment’s very existence is a barrier to strategic adjustment. Second, the foreign policy establishment’s preferences invariably prevail because it exercises *discourse dominance*, which allows it to frame issues, and to set the bounds of discussion by signaling to a wider audience what policy positions are legitimate, and, perhaps even more important, which are not. In this article, I begin by discussing how the American foreign policy establishment’s members are recruited, and focus on its links to America’s corporate and financial elite. Then, I lay out the key elements of the foreign policy establishment’s world views. I show how the foreign policy establishment uses discourse dominance to ensure that US grand strategy reflects its core beliefs about America’s international political role. Finally, I demonstrate that with respect to China, the foreign policy establishment’s world view, and the discursive practices it employs, make it unlikely that the USA will be able peacefully to accommodate China’s rise.

**Keywords** American foreign policy establishment · Elites · The power elite · Sino-American relations · American grand strategy · Foreign policy discourses

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✉ Christopher Layne  
clayne@tamu.edu

<sup>1</sup> The Bush School of Government, 220 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4220, USA



Grand strategy is Janus-faced. It both looks outward to the international security environment in which the state finds itself, and inward, which means it is shaped by domestic factors. Not least important of these is the state's foreign policy elite, which is charged with formulating and implementing the state's grand strategy. In this article, I demonstrate that there are compelling reasons why the USA should reconsider its current grand strategy—variously described as primacy or deep engagement—and, instead, adopt a less activist strategy such as offshore balancing, or restraint (Layne 1997, 2006; Mearsheimer 2001; Posen 2014). The most salient reason for the USA to make a change of direction is that its current strategy has set the USA on a collision course with China.

What explains the American foreign policy establishment's resistance to strategic adjustment? In this article, I offer a two-pronged answer. First, the American foreign policy establishment imposes a broadly uniform world view on those who comprise it. In this sense, the foreign policy establishment's very existence is a barrier to strategic adjustment. Second, the foreign policy establishment's preferences invariably prevail because it exercises *discourse dominance*, which allows it to frame issues, and to set the bounds of discussion by signaling to a wider audience what policy positions are legitimate, and, perhaps even more important, which are not.

In this article, I begin by discussing how the American foreign policy establishment members are recruited, and focus on its links to America's corporate and financial elite. Then, I lay out the key elements of the foreign policy establishment's world views. I show how the foreign policy establishment uses discourse dominance to ensure that US grand strategy reflects its core beliefs about America's international politics political role. Finally, I demonstrate that with respect to China, the foreign policy establishment's world view, and the discursive practices it employs, make it unlikely that the USA will be able peacefully to accommodate China's rise.

## The imperative of US strategic adjustment

"Few historians would deny, today," the diplomatic historian John Lewis Gaddis has observed, "that the United States did expect to dominate the international scene after World War II and that it did so well before the Soviet Union emerged as a clear and present antagonist" (Gaddis 1993). Indeed, 1945 was America's *first* unipolar moment. When World War II ended, by virtue of its overwhelming military and economic supremacy, the USA incontestably was the most powerful actor in the international system. The USA used its commanding position both to pursue a grand strategy of primacy, and to construct the postwar international order—the *Pax Americana*—which endured for more than six decades (Leffler 1992). The Cold War's end gave primacy a second wind. A quarter century later, however, the foundations of US dominance are eroding.

The USA is in relative decline—a fact underscored in October 2014, when the International Monetary Fund announced that China had displaced the USA as the world's largest economy (measured by purchasing power parity) (Fray 2014). America's relative decline is the result of both internal factors (economic weakness



and a looming fiscal crunch set to hit in the early 2020s), and external developments (China's rise, Russia's resurgence, and the strategic swamp from which the USA cannot extricate itself in the Middle East and Afghanistan). Far from scaling back its overseas commitments, however, the Asian "pivot"—a policy of containing a rising China—the war against the Islamic State, and resurgent Russian power—has caused US commitments to expand. Early signs are that this will not change with Trump administration. Facing simultaneous challenges in three widely separated areas of the globe (Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East), the USA is, in a word—actually two—"imperially overstretched" (Kennedy 1987). Especially worrisome are the implications of the US pivot to Asia because it puts America on a course to collide with China in a contest for regional hegemony in East Asia. For both geopolitical and economic reasons, there is a compelling case that US interests would best be served by an offshore balancing strategy. Yet, to date, strategic readjustment has gained no traction with the American foreign policy establishment. When it comes to grand strategy, the foreign policy establishment believes the USA can—and should—stand pat.

### Is there a foreign policy establishment?

Asserting that a foreign policy establishment exists in the USA—and that US foreign policy fundamentally is an *elite*-driven process—poses a twofold conundrum. First, the claim that there are elites in the USA clashes with the egalitarian ethos that is deeply rooted in America's political culture. It also places front and center the question of what role social classes play in the making of US grand strategy—notwithstanding the oft-heard assertion that the USA is a "classless" society. Second, the narrative of American democracy stresses the role of popular control over the government. Given the dual narratives of egalitarianism and popular control, Americans recoil from the idea that rather than being democratic, foreign policy making in the USA is the province of an establishment whose membership is comprised of an elite class, and which is largely immune from effective public control. As the political scientist G. William Domhoff puts it, "the idea that a relatively fixed group of privileged people might shape the economy and government for their own benefit goes against the American grain" (Domhoff 2014, 1). Nevertheless, it is a good bet that at some level most of the attentive public in the USA understands that there really is a foreign policy establishment, the great postwar achievements of which—containment, the construction of international institutions (the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank), the Marshall Plan, and the founding of the Atlantic Alliance—have been celebrated.

The US foreign policy establishment is bi-partisan, and from the late 1890s until 1920, it was instrumental in propelling America's rise to great power status. However, notwithstanding its role as the leading economic and financial power in the international system, during most of the inter-war period the USA did not step up to the plate and claim the mantle of hegemonic leadership. World War II and its Cold War aftermath presented the foreign policy establishment with a "second chance"—which it firmly grasped—to assert American hegemonic leadership and structure the international order (Devine 1967). The foreign policy establishment



wanted “America to succeed Britain as the military and economic guarantor and moral leader of an enlightened, liberal, democratic, and capitalist world order” (Hodgson 1973, 11). Since 1945, the foreign policy establishment has held a coherent, liberal internationalist view of America’s role in international politics. This is based on: American primacy (“American leadership”), the imperative of national security, Liberal ideology, and—perhaps most importantly—the economic Open Door. From 1945 until today, the foreign policy establishment has aspired “quite simply to the moral and political leadership of the world” (Hodgson 1973, 10–11).

### **“Who are Those Guys?” Membership of the foreign policy establishment**

The foreign policy establishment has had two incarnations. The “old” foreign policy establishment’s heyday was from the late 1890s to the late 1960s, the era when the East Coast elite was clearly ascendant in the US foreign policy making process. This elite was white, male, Protestant (almost exclusively Presbyterian and Episcopalian), and drawn from the upper economic strata. Members of the elite were educated at select Eastern prep schools, and received their higher education in the Ivy League (especially Harvard, Yale and Princeton). The influence of the “old” foreign policy establishment reached its apogee in the two decades following the end of World War II. The so-called Wise Men who directed America’s post-World War II foreign policy establishment were all cut from the same cloth (Isaacson and Thomas 1986). Similarities of background and experience forged the social and intellectual bonds that shaped the establishment’s shared outlook about US foreign policy (and, arguably, the “groupthink” that led the USA into the Vietnam quagmire) (Janis 1972, 1982). Importantly, while many of the old foreign policy establishment’s members came from privileged backgrounds, talented individuals who were not from well-to-do families were able to gain membership: the post-World War II foreign policy establishment was not “a closed circle admissible only by birthright” (Isaacson and Thomas 1986, 28). Rather, as Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas have written, it was “meritocratic, at least for those eager to accept its style... The cultivation process was a mutual one: Just as they sought admission to what they considered a special elite, the group sought to groom them and others for inclusion in its tradition of high-minded service” (Isaacson and Thomas 1986, 28). This meritocratic ethos enabled the “old” foreign policy establishment to overcome the political and social convulsions of the 1960s. The foreign policy establishment emerged from the upheavals with its power and influence intact because of its willingness to reach out and recruit new members from such previously underrepresented groups as women and people of color.

Since the 1960s, the foreign policy establishment has become less white, less male, less Protestant, less East Coast centric, and its ranks leavened significantly with women, people of color, Catholics, and Jews. It would be logical to conclude that these new, non-traditional members of the foreign policy establishment might have brought with them fresh perspectives about the US role in the world. This did



not happen, however, because the foreign policy establishment successfully co-opted, assimilated, and socialized the members recruited from non-traditional backgrounds.

## Why the foreign policy establishment matters

When it comes to making US grand strategy, the existence of the foreign policy establishment matters for three reasons. First, the establishment separates acceptable policy options from those that are not. In this respect, the establishment's existence is a powerful guarantor of continuity in US grand strategy. Second, the foreign policy establishment is a subset of the corporate and financial elite (the "one percent"). As such, the foreign policy establishment broadly reflects the corporate and financial elite's interests, outlook, and world view. Third, because it is imbedded in a network connecting policymakers with the corporate and financial elite, and also to the policy-planning network of important foundations and think tanks, the foreign policy establishment is a transmission belt for incorporating the corporate and financial elite's policy preferences and outlook into US grand strategy-making process (Parmar 2012; Van Apeldoorn and De Graaff 2014).

Its function as an ideational filter explains why, notwithstanding the changes in the composition of its membership, the foreign policy establishment's very existence works to ensure a high degree of continuity in US grand strategy. There are several reasons for this. First, as Inderjeet Parmar observes, while the composition of the foreign policy establishment has changed at the lower echelons, "the highest echelons of the Establishment remain socially rooted in the east coast and Ivy League and retain its internationalist orientation" (Parmar 2012, 40). This means that the belief system of its traditional membership remains at its institutional core, and is passed on to newly recruited members. Second—and equally important—in crucial respects, the women and people of color admitted to the foreign policy establishment are drawn from the same universities and social milieus as their WASP male counterparts. In this respect, their recruitment tracks the process by which women and minorities are brought into the broader corporate and financial elite of which the foreign policy establishment is a part (Domhoff 2014, 28). This helps insure a high degree of intellectual and ideational homogeneity within the foreign policy establishment, and between it and the corporate and financial elite.

New groups entering the foreign policy establishment are "socialized," and assimilated in the same way as their WASP male counterparts. Regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or skin color, those who want to be part of the foreign policy establishment (or the broader power elite from which its upper ranks are filled) are absorbed into the elite's social institutions, and adopt its mores and lifestyle. They live in the same residential areas, join the same private clubs, and send their children to the same private schools (Mills 2000, 57–58). Membership of these social institutions fosters social bonding. Even more important, it creates intellectual cohesion—and an unspoken commonality of outlook and interests—within the foreign policy establishment. Elite groups like the foreign policy establishment "share assumptions so deep that they do not need to be articulated" (Hodgson 1973).



Through the recruitment and socialization process, the foreign policy establishment has been able to ensure that its core beliefs about American policy are self-perpetuating even as the composition of its membership has changed. As C. Wright Mills observed, “the internal discipline and the community of interests that bind” enables the foreign policy establishment to be virtually certain that its members accept its core assumptions and beliefs (Mills 2000, 283). Indeed, for its members, the foreign policy establishment’s foundational beliefs are pretty much articles of faith. As Johns Hopkins professor Michael Mandelbaum—himself a card-carrying member of the establishment—has written, within the establishment dissent from these shared beliefs and assumptions about the US world role is rare (Mandelbaum 2010).

Although there are occasional disagreements about tactics, when it comes to the big picture, the establishment’s convictions about the cardinal points of US grand strategy are pretty much set in concrete, and debates about first principles are rare. Moreover, the foreign policy establishment has a big stick that it can use to deter—or punish—any of its members who contemplate challenging the conventional wisdom. As the political scientist William Domhoff observes, the “power elite”—of which the foreign policy establishment is a key component—has the ability to impose costs on those “who begin to criticize the general consensus” (Domhoff 2014, 129). Mandelbaum makes a similar point. He observes that in debates about US foreign policy and grand strategy, there are certain lines that members of the foreign policy establishment must not cross. Those who do cross, he says, do so at their own peril: “Prudent people who wish to be considered members in good standing of the foreign policy establishment take care not to violate these limits” (Mandelbaum 2010, 32).

The second reason the existence of the foreign policy establishment matters is because it is a subset—and represents the interests—of a definable social class: America’s corporate and financial elites. The political scientists Lawrence Jacobs and Benjamin Page have found that US foreign policy is “is most heavily and consistently influenced by internationally oriented business leaders”—that is, by the One Percent (Jacobs and Page 2005, 107). As Thomas Ferguson has shown, these elites—which represent outward looking, large capital intensive corporations and investment banks—reconsolidated their power during the New Deal (Ferguson 1984, 41–94). From then until the present day, it is these interests that have constituted the core of the US corporate and financial elite, and, by extension, of the foreign policy establishment. The main reason the USA has pursued a grand strategy of primacy since 1945 is because this advances interests of America’s dominant corporate and financial elite. This does not mean that US corporate and financial elites have “hijacked” the state (Snyder 1991). As Bastiaan van Apeldoorn and Nana de Graaff (2014, 29–55) observe, the state is an arena in which contending social forces compete to have their preferences transformed into policy. They point out, however, the playing field is not level because “the state tends to be more open to some social classes and groups than to others and tends to select or favor their strategies over others” (Van Apeldorn and De Graaff 2014, 33). In the USA, the foreign policy establishment is the transmission mechanism that allows the One Percent to utilize the policy-planning process to define the content of the US national interest.



The third reason the foreign policy establishment's existence matters is because of the interconnections ("interlocks") among all of the establishment's components (which include foundations, think tanks, powerful organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations, as well as government officials) and the corporate and financial elite (Abelson 2006; Schulzinger 1984). Van Apeldoorn and De Graaf (2012) have traced and visually displayed these linkages by using a "social network mapping" approach. Interlocks—which foster personal ties between policymakers and members of the corporate and financial elites—facilitate the wielding of two kinds of influence over US grand strategy by the corporate and financial elite (Van Apeldoorn and De Graaf 2012, 598). First, members of this elite often are recruited into mid- and senior-level positions in the government (in the State Department, Defense Department, and National Security Council, for example). They also sit on the boards of the institutions—foundations, think tanks, and policy discussion groups—that comprise what the political scientist William Domhoff calls the policy-planning network (Domhoff 2014). Influence, however, runs simultaneously in two directions for two reasons. First, there is the "revolving door" through which senior officials rotate between government service, and jobs in the corporate and financial sectors. Thus, when out of office, many who have served in senior government positions (and often will serve again in the future) are part of the corporate and financial elite. Second, senior executives of think tanks and foundations often are linked to the corporate and financial elite through service on corporate boards of directors. It is through these interlocking relationships—which act as a force multiplier—that the corporate and financial elites influence the US foreign policymaking process.

This does not mean that the US grand strategy-making process has been "captured" by specific firms. As Van Apeldoorn and de Graaff observe, when members of the corporate and financial elite enter government service, they take on a new role and identity. As such, "they no longer directly represent a particular corporation but the US government and are expected to take a more general and longer-term view regarding the overall geopolitical interests of the US state" (Van Apeldoorn and De Graaf 2012, 598). At the same time, however, when they enter government service, they bring with them a conception of US interests and America's world role that has been shaped by their socialization into the corporate and financial elites (Van Apeldoorn and De Graaf 2012, 598). The interlocks between the foreign policy establishment and the corporate and financial elite thus blur the divide between state and society. As a result, far from "hijacking the state" America's dominant elites essentially *are* the state.

The linkages between the foreign policy establishment and the corporate and financial elites are the key to answering the question of how US national interests are defined. This is a question that Realist IR scholars cannot answer notwithstanding their—correct—emphasis on the primacy of the "national interest" in driving great powers' grand strategies. If we want to know the content of the US' national interests, however, there is no foreign policy version of Mt. Sinai that we can ascend, and find those interests inscribed on stone tablets. Beyond the obvious—defending the nation's territorial integrity and ensuring its survival—multiple definitions of the national interest are plausible. In other words, the "national interest" is a contested



concept that is the product of competition among contending social forces to define what the objectives of the state's grand strategy ought to be. Here is where the interlocks that connect policymakers to the wider foreign policy establishment, and thence to the corporate and financial elites, come into play. The foreign policy establishment's world view is the basis for articulating US national interests, and for the construction of discursive frameworks that enable its preferences to prevail.

### **The foreign policy establishment's world view: core components**

What is striking about the foreign policy establishment's world view is that it has remained fundamentally unchanged since the early 1940s. Similarly unchanged are the discourses that the foreign policy establishment has employed to justify, and win support for, its policy preferences. In retrospect, the foreign policy establishment's world view crystallized during the period between the fall of France in June 1940 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (Sherry 1995). The same ideas, and discourses, about America's interests from that period have been recycled over and over again to support US policy during the Cold War, and, more recently, in the post-9/11 wars in the Middle East. Today, they shape America's policy toward a rising China. The core components of the foreign policy establishment's world view are: the primacy of national security, the imperative of American leadership, the importance of an open international economy, and the need to export America's liberal political ideas.

Before the 1940–1941 “great debate” about whether America should enter the European war, the prevailing view in the foreign policy establishment was that, because of geography (and a powerful navy) the American homeland itself was invulnerable to attack. The belief in American invulnerability evaporated—at least within the collective mind of the foreign policy establishment—when Nazi Germany overran France. Advances in technology (especially long range airpower), the traditional American fear (dating back to the Napoleonic wars) of a single hostile power dominating the European continent, and the ideological threat to the “American way of life” posed by fascism and communism, shattered the traditional belief that the USA was safe. President Franklin D. Roosevelt argued that the USA now found itself in a new geopolitical environment of omnipresent threat. The belief that the USA lives in a dangerous world has dominated foreign policy establishment thinking ever since (Sherry 1995; Thompson 1992). Even during the triumphalist interlude of the 1990s, the foreign policy establishment warned (in the words of President George H. W. Bush) that America's security now was imperiled by amorphous forces of “uncertainty, instability, and danger.” The USA has been on a war footing almost uninterruptedly from the summer of 1940 to the present, and this has given birth the national security state (and its accompanying culture, and discourse).

The challenge posed by external threats (real or perceived) gave rise to an expansive definition of US security interests, and a globe-straddling American military presence (Leffler 1984). However, the foreign policy establishment has not simply relied on the hard fist of armed might. To deal with perceived external threats to the USA—geopolitical, economic, and ideational—the American





response has been multifaceted. First, even while World War II was ongoing, the foreign policy establishment decided that postwar American hegemony was the key to creating a stable and secure postwar international system. To bulwark its post-1945 hegemony, the USA created a web of security, political, and economic institutions—and disseminated norms of international conduct—that legitimated the *Pax Americana* (Ikenberry 2000). These institutions and norms are at the heart of what foreign policy establishmentarians refer to as today’s “rules-based” international order (Ikenberry 2011).

The foreign policy establishment’s response to perceived external threats has been consistent. The USA needs to step up to the plate and assert “American leadership”—the foreign policy establishment’s code words for US hegemony (Obama 2015). The foreign policy establishment’s pursuit of American hegemony is based on the belief that the USA must act as the leader of the international system (and a concomitant aversion to the existence of great power rivals; in other words, a preference for unipolarity). As the diplomatic historian Michael Hogan comments, the US foreign policy establishment has subscribed to the “belief that leadership of the free world [is] a sacred mission thrust upon the American people by divine Providence and the laws of both history and nature” (Hogan 1998, 15).

The foreign policy establishment believes the USA has a responsibility to lead. If it fails to do so, bad things will happen. Here, the foreign policy establishment’s narrative invariably cites the period between World War I and World War II—and the shopworn clichés about “isolationism” and “Munich”—as proof. It often is asserted that the USA bears responsibility for the coming of World War II. Instead of leading, it is said, America’s abstention from European security affairs cleared the path for Axis aggression. And, purportedly, by failing to act as an economic hegemon, the USA stood on the sidelines as the Great Depression destabilized the international system geopolitically by giving rise to the policies of economic nationalism that are thought to have been an important cause of World War II (Pollard 1985). These purported lessons of the past continue to resonate with the foreign policy establishment. For the foreign policy establishment, it is the same never-ending story. Dean Acheson—a paragon of foreign policy establishment virtue, who served President Harry S. Truman as Secretary of State—probably said it best. As he told McGeorge Bundy—the foreign policy establishment paladin who served as President John F. Kennedy’s national security adviser—“In the final analysis, the United States is the locomotive at the head of mankind, and the rest of the world is the caboose” (Trachtenberg 2003, 19).

The foreign policy establishment regards international economic openness—also known variously as economic interdependence, globalization, and the Open Door—and the global spread of America’s liberal values as core objectives of US grand strategy. The two are intertwined. The Obama administration was simply the most recent US administration to stress that “a growing and open global economy serves as a source of opportunity for the American people and a source of strength for the United States” (National Security Strategy 2010, 28). The foreign policy establishment believes economic openness is a cornerstone of US prosperity, and this is unlikely to change during the Trump administration. The Obama administration nicely restated this long-standing view: “To promote prosperity for all



Americans, we will need to lead the international community to expand the inclusive growth of the integrated, global economy” (National Security Strategy 2010, 31). The flip side of the foreign policy establishment’s commitment to an open international economy is its fear of closure: that vital regions like Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East will be closed off to the USA both economically and ideationally.

## Discourse dominance

The foreign policy establishment continues to believe that a grand strategy of primacy best furthers American interests. But there is a strong case to be made that primacy leads to imperial overstretch, and the risk of war—especially with a fast ascending China. Primacy has drawn the USA into costly and futile wars—like Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The war now being waged against the so-called Islamic State looks to be more of the same. Indeed, under the Trump administration the USA seems headed for an all-out war of civilizations against the Islamic world. With its high defense budgets—which probably will increase during the Trump administration—primacy is increasingly burdensome economically. Moreover, the benefits of economic openness for the USA no longer are obvious. Globalization is an important cause of the US economy’s de-industrialization, glaring inequalities in the distribution of wealth, and the stagnation of middle class incomes. (Stiglitz 2002, 2013). Indeed, Donald Trump was elected because of a working class backlash against globalization, and the elites that favor it. Notwithstanding these consequences of primacy, US grand strategy has not changed. As we have seen, one reason for this is the foreign policy establishment’s belief system. There also is a second reason: the foreign policy establishment consensus is buttressed by the establishment’s discourse dominance.

By exercising its discourse dominance, the foreign policy establishment shapes the national conversation about America’s world role. Through its discursive practices, the policy establishment frames issues, and sets the bounds of discussion by signaling to a wider audience what policy positions are legitimate. The foreign policy establishment’s discourse is used to sell the public on the need for American strategic, economic, and ideational internationalism. Although Americans are taught that the USA is a democracy and that there is a marketplace of ideas in which the “truth” wins out, this is not the case with respect to foreign policy. There, market failure—caused by the foreign policy establishment’s near monopoly power over the terms of debate—is the norm. Discourse dominance is achieved by using narratives, historical analogies (invariably false or misleading), and myths. These become imbedded in the vocabulary of US foreign policy debates. Discourse dominance is used to privilege the establishment’s commitment to maintaining US global hegemony, and to shield its world view—and the policy preferences that flow from it—from challenge.

Underlying US foreign establishment discourse is the notion of danger—bolstered by the generous employment of threat inflation—which is used to define American national identity by delineating the US from external sources of menace (the “Other”), and using fear to impose political discipline domestically. (Campbell



1993). The foreign policy establishment's discourse emphasizes that the USA must hold the line against external danger, and never back down when challenged. This is why claims about the importance of American "credibility" and "resolve"—and metaphors about falling dominoes—feature so prominently in foreign policy establishment discourse. (Jervis 1991, 22). Domino imagery segues nicely into the repeated invocation of the "Munich" (or "1930s") analogy to warn that bad things will happen if the USA fails to standup to "aggression" or—even worse—tries to "appease" (that is, negotiate) with the threateners (Khong 1992; Jervis 1976; May 1973; May and Neustadt 1986). The purported "lessons of the past" derived from the 1930s have been invoked to justify, or rationalize, virtually every major post-1945 US military intervention. The 1930s analogy reflects the Churchillian interpretation of that decade's events. However, once the British archives for the period were opened (beginning in the late 1960s), it became apparent that the real story of British strategy and diplomacy in the 1930s was far different from Churchill's self-serving depiction (Reynolds 2005).

The foreign policy establishment's discourse is used to inculcate a belief among the American public that the USA has an obligation "to provide world leadership for global order, collective security, democracy, and capitalism" (Slater 1993/1994, 219). For the foreign policy establishment, its discourse dominance is a powerful tool wielded to discredit critics, stifle awkward questions about its policy preferences, and squelch dissent. Discourse dominance buttresses the establishment's conviction that there is no grand strategic alternative to primacy. The establishment's discourse labels alternative strategies—offshore balancing, or restraint—as examples of "isolationism" and/or "appeasement," which are the big no-no's of American foreign policy. As President George W. Bush said, "America rejects the false comfort of isolationism" (Bush 2006). "America," the Obama administration declared, "has never succeeded through isolationism" (National Security Strategy 2010, 11).

## **US Grand strategy and the future of Sino-American relations: Conflict or conciliation?**

Looking forward, the big question is how the foreign policy establishment will manage the emerging great power rivalry between the USA and China. The American foreign policy establishment's world view, and the discursive practices that support it, suggest that trouble lies ahead. Whether a future clash between the USA and China is avoidable hinges on what is at stake for both nations. For China, the answer is straightforward. China seeks to become the regional hegemon in East (and Southeast) Asia. This is what rising great powers *do*: they seek to establish geopolitical dominance in their own backyards (Layne 2006, 2008; Mearsheimer 2001, 2006). China seeks to dominate East Asia for both security reasons, and to affirm its status and prestige as America's geopolitical equal. China's rise, however, poses the risk of conflict with the USA because China is rubbing up against entrenched American power in East Asia, where the USA has been the incumbent regional hegemon since the end of World War II. Obviously, both cannot be the



preponderant power in East Asia at the same time. This contest for regional dominance is a recipe for a geopolitical train wreck.

It is the USA that holds the key to avoiding a Sino-American collision. The USA could yield its preponderant position in East Asia without imperiling its security. America's predominance in East Asia contributes little, if anything, to US security (defined by the traditional geopolitical metrics of military power and geography). In traditional geopolitical terms, the USA is—as it has been for over a century—the most secure great power in history. Its homeland is shielded from any kind of serious great power threat by geography, its overwhelming military capabilities, and nuclear deterrence. Far from adding to US security, in fact, the potential “entrapment” dynamics of US alliances in the region are a major cause of US *insecurity*. This is a point underscored by the increasingly fraught Sino-Japanese conflict over the Diaoyuai/Senkaku islands into which the USA has been injected because of its alliance with Tokyo.

So why does Washington remain committed to preserving its dominance in East Asia? One reason is that the foreign policy establishment believes any diminishment of the American role in East Asia would be tantamount to retreat and that American leadership consequently would be undermined (Clinton 2011; Friedberg 2011). Ideational considerations also are important. The USA wants to dominate that region to ensure that its markets remain open both to American economic penetration and to penetration by its Liberal ideology (Friedberg 2011). Here, the foreign policy establishment's traditional fear of closure comes into play. China is seen as a threat because its very existence challenges the idea of an “Open Door World” on which America's security is—wrongly—believed to depend (Layne 2006).

China's non-democratic political system is also viewed by the foreign policy establishment as an ideational menace to the USA, because “if Asia comes to be dominated by an authoritarian China, the prospects for liberal reform in any of its non-democratic neighbors will be greatly diminished. Even the region's established democracies could find themselves inhibited from pursuing policies, foreign and perhaps domestic as well, that might incur Beijing's wrath” (Friedberg 2011, 8). It is not stretching the point to suggest that the biggest threat to the USA in East Asia is not China but, rather, the Liberal assumptions imbedded in the foreign policy establishment's world view. The foreign policy establishment's ideological preferences have real world consequences because they are powerful drivers of US grand strategy toward China. That grand strategy, however, not only puts the USA at odds with China, but also reinforces Beijing's insecurities and its deep-rooted fears of Washington's intentions and ambitions. It is *American* policy that generates the negative perception spiral that is pushing the USA and China down the road to confrontation.

Even before the Obama administration's strategic “pivot” to East Asia, Chinese policymakers perceived that the USA was engaged in a policy of encircling China strategically and thwarting its rise. Early signs suggest that the Trump administration's policy may be even harder-edged. At least as worrisome for Chinese leaders is the concern that the USA is trying to promote “regime change” by pressuring China to transform itself into a liberal democracy. As seen in Beijing, the USA “uses ideas of democracy and human rights to de-legitimize and destabilize regimes that espouse alternative values” to American-style democratic free market



capitalism (Nathan and Scobell 2012, 39). Many in the US foreign policy establishment advocate policies—maintaining US military superiority in East Asia, defending Taiwan, creating a powerful anti-Chinese alliance in East and Southeast Asia, working for regime change in China—that inevitably serve to heat-up Sino-American tensions by reinforcing Beijing’s pre-existing fears of American intentions (Friedberg 2011; Nathan and Scobell 2012). There is a deeply rooted belief in the American foreign policy establishment that China is only entitled to assert interests that have been pre-approved by the USA. By ignoring China’s own definition of its interests, the foreign policy establishment is creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of mistrust and rising hostility in Sino-American relations. If the USA really wants to avoid a train wreck with China, it will have to make difficult—even painful—adjustments and adopt a policy that accommodates China’s rise.

## Conclusion

There are powerful arguments—both geopolitical and economic—that support US strategic adjustment. That is, abandoning the grand strategy of primacy in favor of offshore balancing, or restraint. Not least is that primacy means that the USA and China are on course for a head-on collision. There is, however, no reason to believe that the foreign policy establishment is prepared to make any serious accommodations to Chinese interests, or to allow China to become the preponderant power in East Asia—which is, after all, China’s own backyard. If anyone doubted this, it ought to have been dispelled by the US reaction to the decision of Britain, France, and West Germany to join the new China-sponsored Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

On learning of Britain’s application for membership of the AIIB, the Obama administration accused London of the “constant accommodation [read: appeasement]” of China. This is a geopolitical preview of coming attractions. The mutually reinforcing effects of the foreign policy establishment’s world view and underlying assumptions, and its discursive practices, inject a worrisome rigidity into US grand strategy. The foreign policy establishment’s beliefs in American exceptionalism, Liberal ideology, and “openness” will make it difficult for the USA to undertake strategic readjustment (Hartz 1955; Hunt 1987; Williams 1962; Desch 2007/2008). So will the foreign policy establishment’s conception of American national identity, because, as William Wohlforth (2009, 52) has commented, there is plenty of evidence that “US decision-makers value their country’s status of primacy” (Wohlforth 2009, 52) Finally, history—or, more correctly, the foreign policy establishment’s naive notions about it—will also get in the way of conciliating a rising China. When US policymakers look to history as a guide, the default option is to invoke the “lessons” of the 1930s. They would be wiser to think of the lessons of 1914. This misuse of history could have tragic consequences for the Sino-American relationship in the future.

Doubtless, the foreign policy establishment will label as “isolationists” (and “appeasers”) those who advocate strategic adjustment, and accommodation with China. However, as the diplomatic historian McDougall (1997, 40) has noted,



isolationism is nothing more than “a dirty word that interventionists, especially since Pearl Harbor, hurl at anyone who questions their policies.” The foreign policy establishment’s discourse de-legitimizes those who advocate alternatives to the policies it prefers, shuts down debate rather than promoting it, and pushes to the margins those who argue for new approaches and policies. The foreign policy establishment’s discursive practices come with a big price tag, however, because they result in intellectual and policy stasis.

The era of the post-1945 *Pax Americana* is drawing to a close, and the foundations of US primacy are eroding. There is an urgent need for a serious conversation about how US grand strategy can best respond to the challenges of relative US decline, and the rise of China. But the foreign policy establishment will not be the catalyst for this conversation, because it has fallen into a “discourse trap” that prevents it from even acknowledging—much less responding to—the changes that are reshaping the international order (Michaels 2013). One thing seems clear: unless the foreign policy establishment’s dominant discourse changes, there will be no change in American grand strategy. Whether a shift in discourse can occur as long as the current foreign policy establishment remains entrenched in power is doubtful.

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