

BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

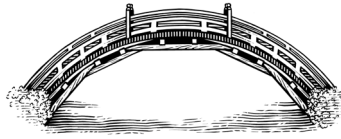
Michael J. Green's

By More Than Providence:

Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783

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Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi

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Michael J. Green

Strategic Providence and the American Journey in Asia

Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi

Michael Green's *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* is a magisterial work, well-argued and exhaustively researched, that provides an invaluable service for those who care about U.S. Asia policy. Indeed, no other book in nearly a century has sought to study so intently the broad sweep of U.S. grand strategy in Asia since the founding of the republic. As U.S. foreign policy experts currently grapple with the implications of a risen China and debate the way forward in Asia, Green's historical treatment generates unique and original insights rooted in the past but relevant for the present. His survey of the United States' Asia strategy in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries should form part of the foundation for considering Asia strategy in this century. In scope and ambition, *By More Than Providence* helps anyone seeking to understand how the United States has grappled with Asia from the revolutionary period through the Cold War and the war on terrorism.

The book is divided into four parts, each covering the rise of a different power. The first part focuses on the rise of the United States and the second, third, and fourth on the rise of Japan, the Soviet Union, and China, respectively. The structure, which is both thematic and chronological, works well. Within each of these four parts, Green explores U.S. grand strategy, its adjustment to a shifting balance of power, and its ultimate effectiveness. Some of the book's most fascinating insights are in its history up through the end of the Cold War.

For most states, and especially for democracies, grand strategy is a challenging endeavor. Green's central argument, however, is that despite occasional inconsistencies and inevitable missteps, the United States has over the last two centuries developed a "distinctive strategic approach" toward the Asia-Pacific. In his view, "the United States has emerged as the preeminent power in the Pacific not by providence alone but through the effective (if not always efficient) application of military, diplomatic, economic, and ideational tools of national power to the problems of Asia" (p. 4).

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The book's chapters chronicle the ways that faith, commerce, geography, and self-defense have repeatedly drawn the United States toward involvement in Asian affairs, but Green sees national strategy as rooted in something even more fundamental. "If there is one central theme," he argues, it is U.S. opposition to any other power exercising "exclusive hegemonic control over Asia or the Pacific" (p. 5). Green argues that the success of these strategies was a product of "more than providence," though he would likely agree that providence too played a defining role. The Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, which together insulate the United States from destructive great-power struggles abroad, constitute a "strategic providence" inherited by successive American generations. This geographic blessing provides Americans with the foundation for pursuing counter-hegemonic strategies in Asia and other regions.

Some might quibble with whether the United States' Asia strategy has been as coherent up close as it appears from a distance, and whether the counter-hegemonic imperative was as evident to American Asia strategists and policymakers in the trenches at any given moment as it was to scholars decades or even a century later. Green's thorough research—nearly a quarter of the book's seven hundred pages are endnotes—effectively answers elements of this charge, demonstrating that many policymakers and presidents thought in these grand strategic terms, though some (like Theodore Roosevelt and Richard Nixon) are said to have done better than others (like Calvin Coolidge and Jimmy Carter).

Rather than weaken his argument, Green's honest acknowledgement that not all policymakers had a consistent or effective Asia strategy is precisely what generates many of the book's most illuminating and original insights. It allows Green to highlight the deep structural reasons that the United States sometimes vacillated in the pursuit of its interests in Asia and explain the variations in its strategic effectiveness.

Green identifies five recurring historical tensions in U.S. grand strategy toward Asia: (1) the elevation of Europe and other theaters over Asia, (2) the swings from a continental China-focused policy to a maritime Japan-focused policy, (3) the question of whether to draw the U.S. forward-defense line closer to Asia or closer to Hawaii, (4) competing interests in self-determination and universal values, and (5) the struggle between free trade and protectionism. Many of these issues persist in contemporary U.S. policy, and seeing their repeated expression in the past is a reminder of the importance of balancing them wisely today.

The five tensions that Green identifies appear in each of the book's fifteen chapters, and in that way they help structure the analysis, facilitate comparability across periods, and lay the foundation for assessments of strategic effectiveness. Indeed, Green generally argues that the most effective U.S. strategies are those that judiciously balance the five tensions in favor of clearly defined interests, all while properly integrating military, economic, diplomatic, and ideational instruments of statecraft.

In the period ahead, Green argues that the right balance of these tensions will require elevating Asia's importance in U.S. strategy; focusing on Japan and other democratic allies while avoiding condominiums with China; maintaining the U.S. forward-defense perimeter, even as China's own defense perimeter pushes outward; continuing to advocate for democracy and human rights; and sustaining support for free trade in the face of domestic headwinds.

One of the most interesting arguments that Green makes, especially amid talk of the United States' relative decline, is that the effectiveness of U.S. strategy is less reliant on overt power than is widely believed. He credits John Quincy Adams (pp. 26–33) and Richard Nixon (pp. 354–61) for advancing U.S. interests during times of limited national power, even while in Green's view other leaders, such as Calvin Coolidge (p. 144) and Harry Truman (pp. 262–63, 284), did much less in Asia with more power. Good strategy—and in particular “clarity of purpose” and the “deliberate identification of ends, ways, and means”—acts as a force multiplier, allowing the United States to wring more out of its resources and instruments of statecraft (p. 541).

Despite the clear advantages of a consistent strategy, it remains to be seen whether clarity of purpose will be enough to cope with the enormity of the China challenge. At present, however, the debate is somewhat moot; especially since the Trump administration seems to lack strategic focus. To the administration's credit, the United States under President Donald Trump has evinced a greater awareness of the importance of great-power competition with China in documents such as the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy. But despite the determined efforts of the administration's Asia hands to pull a strategy together that would reckon with the emerging challenge from China, the administration as a whole so far appears to lack the discipline necessary to formulate and implement one, with policies on trade and North Korea instead shifting rapidly from week to week.

Moreover, in those places where the Trump administration appears to have a consistent approach, its policies run against Green's prescriptions.

Indeed, where Green would advocate working with the Europeans to write the rules of Asia, Trump is punishing the Europeans and ceding to China the pen in rule-writing for emerging and new institutions. Where Green would suggest support for liberal values and free trade, the Trump administration is undermining both. And where Green advocates respecting China, even while competing with it, the administration is taking on an approach that is needlessly confrontational without being sufficiently competitive. For these reasons, his analysis is at times sobering. Many of the sensible prescriptions that it offers, and that the present administration continues to overlook or reject, in fact have the weight of history behind them.

A careful reader of this important book, however, might nevertheless find within it an implicit case for cautious optimism. Green's review of U.S. Asia policy leads him to conclude that even at times when "there is drift and confusion...the core elements of a new strategic approach are quietly taking root" (p. 14). Green even concludes that Americans generally get Asia strategy right, despite occasional missteps. There may be something to these claims. During the present period of apparent strategic drift, U.S. policymakers and scholars are now publicly reckoning with the challenge posed by a risen China. One can only hope that in some revised future edition of *By More Than Providence* Green is able to write that his optimistic vision of U.S. grand strategy remained unblemished by the current chapter in American history, and that amid a historic readjustment in Asia, today's leadership did not squander the "strategic providence" bestowed on the United States by geography and good fortune. ♦

Maritime Strategy Is Grand

James R. Holmes

Michael Green's book *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* is sure to gladden the heart of any American maritime strategist. He opens and closes with references to Alfred Thayer Mahan, the most influential saltwater strategist of the *fin de siècle* era and the second president of the U.S. Naval War College. What's not to like?

Mahan is best known as the prophet of sea battles, whereby the victor wrests "command of the sea" from the defeated, driving the enemy's flag from important expanses or at most allowing it to appear there "as a fugitive."¹ But battle was a means to an end for Mahan, not an end in itself. The goal of amassing "overbearing power" at sea was to pry and hold open commercial, diplomatic, and military access—in that order of importance—to lucrative trading regions such as East Asia.² For him commerce, not naval strife, was king. The navy was the servant of diplomacy, and diplomacy was the servant of commerce—commerce that yielded tax revenue to fund the navy and the diplomatic apparatus.

That made for a virtuous cycle well suited to an insular industrial power such as the United States. But while Mahanian strategy provides a scaffolding for Green's study, *By More Than Providence* is about far more than sea power. It is dedicated to the proposition that the United States can make and execute grand strategy, harnessing the full panoply of statecraft instruments to achieve a "better state of peace," as English strategist B.H. Liddell Hart put it.³

Green's verdict (pp. 4–5, 541) is that U.S. grand strategy in the Asia-Pacific has proved effective on the whole, even though it has been "episodic and inefficient" at times (p. 541). To oversimplify, U.S. strategy

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NOTE ~ The views in this essay are the author's alone.

¹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (1890; repr. New York: Dover, 1987), 138.

² *Ibid.*; and Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations, Naval and Political* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1902), 246.

³ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd ed., rev. (New York: Meridian, 1991), 338.

aims at keeping access to the region open while preventing another hegemon or alliance from dominating the East Asian rimland—and thereby constituting a trans-Pacific threat to North America. A foe commanding all those resources could reach out and do the United States harm. Hence the imperative to meet gathering dangers from forward positions along the rimland.

That Washington is capable of grand strategy is a statement some eminent commentators would dispute. In his book *American Diplomacy*, for instance, the father of containment George Kennan, who makes numerous appearances in Green's book, likens democracy to “one of those prehistoric monsters” that slumbers “in his comfortable primeval mud” until someone whacks off his tail “to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed,” whereupon the beast “lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat.”⁴ Inattention to the strategic surroundings, a dearth of forethought, and clumsy use of power are U.S. hallmarks of grand strategy in Kennan's telling.

Green demurs. Indeed, the central claim he puts forth in *By More Than Providence* is that the United States formulated and carried out grand strategy in a deliberate, if sometimes haphazard way, long before the phrase came to be. He maintains it did so starting in 1783—in other words, from the time the country won independence from the British Empire. Kennan was wrong to denigrate U.S. strategy-making. Washington does more than lie inert or flail around.

It seems that Green has plunged into a larger theoretical controversy. The phrase “grand strategy” is of relatively recent provenance, coming into vogue in the middle of the twentieth century.⁵ It did not exist for much of U.S. history, and therefore U.S. leaders cannot have practiced it. Right? Well, not so much. As Beatrice Heuser counsels in her treatise *Strategy before Clausewitz*, practitioners undertook strategic thought and action long before the 1830s, when Prussian sage Carl von Clausewitz composed his masterwork *On War*.⁶ Or as Michael Handel points out, “One does not

⁴ George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy: 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 65.

⁵ Edward Mead Earle was evidently the first to use the phrase, in his classic *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943). B.H. Liddell Hart followed up a decade later in *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (New York: Praeger, 1954). For further discussion of the origins of the phrase, see Paul Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 2–3.

⁶ Beatrice Heuser, *Strategy before Clausewitz: Linking Warfare and Statecraft, 1400–1830* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1–31.

necessarily have to read *On War* to be a Clausewitzian, since most of his ideas can be arrived at independently through the application of logic and common sense.⁷⁷ Inventing a new bumper sticker for a phenomenon or codifying it in a treatise like *On War* may be helpful for conveying ideas, but naming it does not invent the phenomenon itself. If grand strategy is the art and science of wielding diplomatic, economic, cultural, and military tools for political gain, it has had many fine practitioners throughout human history.

While *By More Than Providence* surveys U.S. history from the founding era through the end of the Obama administration, Green pays special attention to the United States' intermittent "pivots" to Asia (pp. 78–114, 518–540). Mahan himself helped make the case for a pivot following the Spanish-American War (1898), lobbying tirelessly for an oceangoing U.S. Navy, island bases spanning the Pacific Ocean to support fuel-thirsty and repair-intensive steamships, and diplomatic cooperation with Great Britain to prevent rival imperial powers from partitioning China and curtailing commercial access to East Asia. Kindred spirits like Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge made common cause with Mahan—paving the way for a permanent forward presence in East Asia.


The age of the Mahanian rebalance is one maritime strategists revisit time and again. It resembles today's setting in certain important respects while also displaying acute—and likewise instructive—differences. This was an age when a maritime hegemon, Britain's Royal Navy, ruled the waves but had to contend with ambitious new challengers in imperial Germany, Japan, and the United States itself. That is something like today's strategic configuration, wherein another dominant bluewater navy, the U.S. Navy, must contend with an ambitious new challenger in China and an old foe made new in Russia.

Green closes his account by surveying the Obama administration's pivot to Asia. He salutes the strategic wisdom behind the rebalance—acclaiming Barack Obama for being the first president to elevate the Pacific theater to primacy among U.S. strategic commitments—while also taking administration officials to task for mixing messages and being inconsistent about marshaling implements of power to execute the rebalance. Consistency begets success; waffling sows doubt among friends and allies while encouraging mischief-making on the part of competitors.

⁷⁷ Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd ed., rev. (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 11.

Just so. What does this all imply for grand strategy in the age of Trump? It offers a reminder that reordering strategic priorities is hard to do. The logic of rebalancing to Asia remains as compelling as it was after the Spanish-American War, or in 2011 when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton set the Obama pivot in motion. But seismic strategic change needs champions. Converting a Europe-first society like the United States into one that puts Asia first will demand a constant, determined effort from senior officials for a long stretch of time.

The United States was Eurocentric two centuries before Obama ascended to the presidency. It will take more than his eight years in the Oval Office to reorient the country, and the 2016 election cost the rebalance its framer and main champion. Lawmakers and foreign-policy pundits of Atlantic leanings clamored for Washington to undo the pivot almost from its inception.⁸ Their views seem to be gaining ground in Congress, where calls for an Atlantic rebalance are increasingly commonplace.⁹ Pacific proponents, therefore, must now win over an administration that came to office noncommittal about Asia's primacy among regions. They must make their case convincingly, forcefully, and often.

If they succeed, though, they will have sunk bipartisan roots to nourish their strategic preference. Containment worked as grand strategy for four decades because statesmen, lawmakers, and officials from both parties subscribed to its basic logic. China is going nowhere, and by many indices it outstrips the Soviet Union as a strategic competitor. It may take an effort of similar magnitude and duration to face down Beijing's ambitions—and bipartisan unity will be crucial to sustain the effort if so. One trusts that Green will help man the barricades in this fight for years to come. 

⁸ For one such commentary among many, see Clemens Wergin, "America Needs a Pivot to Europe," *New York Times*, April 3, 2014 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/04/opinion/wergin-america-needs-a-pivot-to-europe.html>.

⁹ Rob Wittman, "We Need an Atlantic Rebalance," *Breaking Defense*, May 30, 2018 ~ <https://breakingdefense.com/2018/05/wittman-we-need-an-atlantic-rebalance>.

A Troubling Tale Brilliantly Told

Ashley J. Tellis

Rarely in policy studies does a book come along that merits the adjective “masterly”: Michael Green’s *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* is one such title. Exceeding 700 pages in length, it traces in insightful, lucid prose the history of the United States’ engagement with the Indo-Pacific region—to use a contemporary term popularized by the Trump administration. As Green himself notes, the rarity of his work is somewhat puzzling, given that the Asian “rimland” has been strategically relevant, if not important, to the United States since at least the early twentieth century. Yet analyses that treat the region in an integrated fashion have indeed been scarce. The big exception here, of course, has been the oeuvre produced by theorists of classical geopolitics. The greatest names in the discipline, Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman, understood and, in a manner of speaking, debated the significance of the region for world politics. But their contributions hinged more on the understanding of particular spatial relationships than the historical interactions between specific states (see pp. 208–9).

When the latter have come into focus, the vast majority of work has centered on studies of specific bilateral ties, such as U.S.-Japan, U.S.-China, U.S.-Korea, and, more recently, U.S.-India relations. Detailing the broader expanse of U.S. engagement with Asia, or even rimland Asia, as a whole has proved to be more elusive. In part, the difficulties are methodological because the political construction of Asia is arguably a colonial invention. But the academic predilection, especially in the United States, for detailed but narrow analysis is equally to blame. And the demands of political necessity, however transient, have only reinforced these other constraints. Thus, for much of the early Cold War, U.S. policy focused largely on Northeast Asia, with Southeast Asia functioning mainly as a geopolitical periphery, even though Washington was consumed in a costly, decade-long war there. All told, then, a variety of pressures converged to make an integrated vision of the Asian rimland difficult, and the fragmentation in U.S. strategy during the Cold War only strengthened the analytical neglect.

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By More Than Providence, therefore, is exceptionally relevant because it appears at a time when the previously discrete political segments of the Asian coast are linked together in unprecedented ways. This entwining is owed partly to exogenous variables such as technology—the information and communications and the transportation revolutions, in particular—but it is also driven by the most significant geopolitical development of our time: the rise of China as a new global power. China’s recrudescence promises to integrate not merely the rimland but all continental Asia, if the Belt and Road Initiative bears fruit in the manner hoped for by the country’s leadership. The necessity for a coherent U.S. strategy toward Asia as a whole—both its continental and its maritime dimensions—is therefore imperative. Although Green’s book focuses mainly on the latter, it is nonetheless remarkable because it does intellectual justice to at least one important half of the challenge. Moreover, it impressively connects the evolution of U.S. relations with key regional powers to the fundamental transformations in larger U.S. strategy, especially the great shifts in maritime strategy that have occurred since the mid-nineteenth century, thus underscoring how the United States’ engagement with Asia has been inextricably intertwined with its rise as a global power.


A sound policy toward this region will prove elusive if it is not anchored in a robust ideational foundation. Green sets out to provide this foundation, in part because such an undertaking has been conspicuous only by its exceptionalism. The closest work to this one in recent years has been Bruce Cumings’s magisterial *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power*. But while Cumings examines how the United States and its policies shaped the Pacific edge of Asia, he focuses even more deeply on how domestic politics drove, and were driven by, the United States’ Pacific engagements. As a result, the analysis of interactions between the United States and the Asian rimland serves almost as a backdrop to explain the transformation of the United States and its rise in power. Green’s book, in contrast, while integrating extensive information about internal U.S. politics, the debates about strategy among elites, and U.S. economic interests in Pacific Asia, focuses more concertedly on the United States’ strategic interactions with the Asian rimland states since the founding of the republic, bringing the story up to date to include contemporary recognition of India as integral to that geographic space.

Green’s opus is doubly impressive because it is not simply a political narrative but rather incorporates three elements simultaneously—struggles

over security politics, trade and commerce, and ideas and ideals—in an unending braid. Thanks to the burdens of history, the character of U.S. engagement with China is of necessity central to the story and worthy of further comment here. From the earliest interactions, when American citizens were attracted to China to earn profits that would compensate them for the losses suffered in their revolution against Great Britain, to the present time, when U.S. corporations are lured by the promise of the Chinese market to sustain their profitability and global technological competitiveness, China has been a seductive lodestar for private actors in American society. But the state has not been far behind. Green documents how the United States, from the very beginning of its formal diplomatic interaction with the Qing Dynasty down to the latest iteration of “competitive collaboration” with Beijing since the global financial crisis, has in fact chalked up a record that can only be charitably described as troubling.

The reasons for those disappointments are many and varied depending on circumstances, but the constant theme of frustrated goals leaps out from Green’s analysis of U.S. policy toward China over the last two centuries. Whether it be Washington’s inability to maintain privileged relations with the Qing court under the guise of anti-imperialism (chap. 1), the failure to ensure the viability of the Qing Dynasty while preserving the Open Door policy (chap. 5), the abortive efforts to protect China in the face of Japanese imperialism in the interwar years and during World War II (chaps. 5–6), the powerlessness to prevent a Communist victory in China in the early postwar period (chap. 7), or even the pyrrhic successes in exploiting the Sino-Soviet split after 1972 (chap. 9) and integrating China into the liberal international economic order after 2001 (chaps. 14–15), the broader story remains the same: the United States has invested heavily in seeking a relationship with China that advances its larger strategic interests, but these efforts have repeatedly fallen short. This has had deleterious consequences both for the grand strategy of the United States and now for its relative power.

This unsettling insight should serve as a sobering reminder for those who are still sanguine about the United States’ ability to shape China’s ascendancy through deepened engagement. On this matter, Green offers a vital—and oft-forgotten—counterpoint: that success in Washington’s engagement of Beijing will fundamentally depend as much on its ability to forge productive partnerships with China’s neighbors and especially with its competitors. At a time when Chinese assertiveness is unabashedly on the rise, the necessity of sustaining the strongest ties possible with China’s Asian rivals, and with other bystanders, is indeed compelling.

These offsetting strategic partnerships, however, cannot come to fruition unless the United States pays particular attention to revitalizing its power-projection capabilities—especially those most relevant to military success in Asia—in order to ensure the viability of U.S. security guarantees and the continued “coupling” of the United States to maritime Asia, if not Asia writ large. Beyond the demands of good diplomacy and the maintenance of productive trading relations (especially with partners), this requirement only underscores the imperative of preserving U.S. technological dominance—the *sine qua non* for increasing U.S. prosperity and maintaining the country’s preeminence globally. Given the considerable level of national confusion about why the latter goal matters or how U.S. strategic investments in Asia conduce to its attainment, scholars and policymakers alike could do no better than to start by reading *By More Than Providence*. Green’s book not only underscores the pitfalls of a privileged engagement with China but also illuminates why wider success in Asia today is indispensable for preserving U.S. primacy at the core of the international system. 

A Seminal History of U.S. Asia Strategy since the Founding of the Republic

Adam P. Liff

Michael Green's *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* is as striking in the ambitious promise to provide a "comprehensive treatment of American statecraft toward Asia" (p. 2) from 1783 to 2016 as it is in its ability to deliver the goods. Roughly a decade in the making, Green's study should be required reading for any scholar or practitioner of U.S. Asia strategy, for both its historical insights and contemporary policy relevance. The book is especially timely in light of recent developments in Washington and the region. Indeed, many of the key assumptions long underpinning U.S. strategy confront major challenges both from the region's geopolitical shifts and, perhaps most startlingly for many readers of *Asia Policy*, from within the United States itself. Yet the book also powerfully reminds the reader of two historical truths: that the United States has overcome major challenges before, and that contestation over its appropriate role in the Asia-Pacific and the world is a recurring theme on the home front.

In *By More Than Providence*, Green sets out to examine "the roots of modern American strategic thought on the Pacific," differentiating his study from two other categories of works: "compelling histories of U.S. bilateral relations" with regional countries and "revisionist histories" oriented around themes of "racism and economic imperialism or...American encounters with Asia in a larger cultural context" (p. 2). Drawing a contrast with modern historians, which he rather provocatively states "tend to eschew human agency" (p. 2), Green unabashedly aims to shed light on the objectives and decisions shaping the failures and successes of past U.S. administrations in the region so as to inform current and future U.S. policy. Green reveals his major takeaway on the former early in the book:

If there is one central theme in American strategic culture as it has applied to the Far East over time, it is that the United States will not tolerate any other power establishing exclusive hegemonic control over Asia or the Pacific. Put another way, for over two centuries, the national interest of the United States has been identified by key leaders as ensuring that the Pacific Ocean remains a conduit for American ideas and goods to

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flow westward, and not for threats to flow eastward toward the homeland. (p. 5)

Green is a leading scholar of Japanese foreign policy and East Asian international relations and served as senior director for Asia on the National Security Council during the George W. Bush administration. He wrote the bulk of this study after this experience in government, imbuing his analysis with the perspective of both a scholar and a practitioner. Across fifteen chapters, *By More Than Providence* surveys the historical record of U.S. policy debates on Asia strategy from George Washington to Barack Obama. Noting that “this was not a narrative that should begin in 1945, as most do, but rather in the cradle of the republic and the first American encounters with the vast Pacific Ocean and the Far East” (p. xvi), it is particularly commendable that Green begins his study in the oft-overlooked late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These chapters are brimming with fascinating anecdotes and surveys of debates that will likely be new to many readers.

Perhaps Green’s greatest analytical contribution is captured in his identification of five recurring “tensions” in U.S. policy debates about how to approach the region: (1) Europe versus Asia, (2) continental versus maritime and China versus Japan, (3) competing definitions of the forward-defense line, (4) self-determination versus universal values, and (5) protectionism versus free trade (see pp. 6–11 for a summary). Though scholars are sure to debate the relative importance of these themes, Green provides an extremely useful, historically grounded framework for thinking about the at times inevitable tradeoffs that policymakers of every era must confront, as well as the interactivity of strategic effects. As any student of contemporary U.S. strategy toward the Asia-Pacific knows, aspects of these tensions continue to permeate debates in Washington today. The fifth, in particular, has come roaring back with a vengeance under the Trump administration.

There is much to praise in Green’s tome (in the best sense of the term). As with any history, scholars will debate his evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of individual leaders or administrations. And his study also arguably has a few limitations—perhaps an inevitability given its ambitious scope. First, though the study is understandably focused on decision-making in Washington, the analysis leaves the reader wanting more assessment of the consequences—intended or not—of certain U.S. policies for decision-making in regional countries. This is particularly true in instances with compelling contemporary relevance, such as the link

between allies' concerns about the credibility of U.S. security commitments during periods of perceived retrenchment (e.g., in the 1970s) and their flirtation with indigenous nuclear weapons development programs, which in turn fed back into and shaped U.S. policies on extended deterrence and counterproliferation. Relatedly, and especially in light of Green's claim in the closing pages that "most states are also hedging to some extent" between the United States and China (p. 543), a more unifying analysis in the concluding chapter of how "entrapment" or "abandonment" fears have shaped U.S. allies' policy decisions and accordingly factor into U.S. strategy would also have been welcome. These issues might be interesting to address in a preface to a future edition.

Finally, some readers—especially international relations scholars—will note that there is limited consideration of competing theoretical explanations for the foreign policy decisions of the United States or countries in the region. To be sure, the book does not claim to be a primarily theoretical work, and its approach facilitates a straightforward, widely accessible narrative. But this also seems to come with some drawbacks for the book's effort to identify and analyze the complex and manifold variables that shape U.S. decision-making.¹ Though as a self-described "realist" Green understandably privileges concerns about structure, power, and interests, the book is very much a story about human agency—the ability of individuals and groups of U.S. leaders to shape and reshape international affairs. Green, to his credit, recognizes the importance of other concerns of policymakers, such as domestic politics and values (e.g., democracy and human rights). Nevertheless, at key points more direct, critical engagement of alternative explanations would have made his case-specific arguments even more compelling.


These quibbles aside, in a single volume Green offers an extremely well-researched, empirically rich, lucid, and compelling historical analysis of U.S. Asia strategy since the founding of the American republic. Its clear prose and chronological narrative make the book particularly useful in the university classroom—especially as a core text around which to design a course on U.S. foreign policy toward East Asia. Scholars, policymakers, and students are sure to read and debate its arguments for years to come—the very definition of a seminal scholarly work.

¹ As Green himself notes, "pure realpolitik has never been a sustainable basis for American policy" (p. 542).

Reviewing this book in 2018, one finishes the last page eager to receive the author's assessment of how the current U.S. administration's policies fit in to the vicissitudes of U.S. grand strategy across the history of the republic, the success of which, Green observes, requires a "clarity of purpose and deliberate identification of ends, ways, and means" (p. 541). As of this writing, the Trump administration's approach to the region would not seem to check the boxes for the author's conceptualization of grand strategy as defined under the administration of a president he clearly admires (Ronald Reagan).² Elsewhere, he notes that "when new administrations have failed to make the expansion of trade a central pillar...they have invariably lost ground in terms of both economic and security interests in the region" (p. 11).

Indeed, the contemporary reality is sobering, especially for those who share Green's contention that "the margin for error in American statecraft toward Asia is narrowing" (p. 428) and "a clear and consistent demonstration of American strategic intent is...more important than ever in Asia" (p. 543). However, in a reassuring note two pages earlier, he also states the following:

American grand strategy has been episodic and inefficient, but in the aggregate it has been effective. The American people have repeatedly mustered the willpower, focus, and resources to prevail when access to an open order in the region has been fundamentally challenged, and they have contributed in the aggregate to a more prosperous and just Asia-Pacific region. (p. 541)

In the final assessment, roughly a year after its publication, *By More Than Providence* already deserves consideration as an instant classic: a long-overdue and comprehensive history of U.S. Asia strategy that is striking in its scope, accessibility, and analytical clarity, and which addresses a topic that will only gain greater importance in the years ahead. At present, U.S. strategy in the region confronts a number of powerful headwinds. Yet Asia and the world are not standing still. New thinking may be needed in Washington and beyond. One can only hope that the future architects of U.S. strategy will proactively seek to draw lessons from the successes and failures of their forebears. Green's magisterial study gives them an obvious place to start. 

² Green states that "Reagan's approach still merits the label 'grand strategy' because his central concept for winning the Cold War (a) integrated all instruments of American power; (b) was consistently if broadly applied over time and across major agencies; and (c) was agile in implementation" (pp. 388-89). Specifically, President Reagan had "a coherent worldview and the skills to lead" (p. 393).

Assessing the Scope of U.S. Security Commitments in Asia

Stephen G. Brooks

The continued ascent of China is clearly making it more difficult for the United States to maintain its existing security commitments in Asia. But whether it soon will be too risky or too expensive for the United States to stay engaged in the region depends significantly on what forward-defensive line Washington draws. For many analysts, this would seem to be a new strategic question that the United States faces. One of the major contributions of Michael Green's authoritative and systematic examination of the U.S. approach to Asia is to show that this is, in fact, a very old question—one that U.S. presidents have struggled with for centuries and have derived very different answers to. Green's rich historical analysis helpfully sets the stage for considering the question of where the United States should now draw the defensive line in Asia.

By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783 carefully chronicles that even in just the post-World War II period, there has been a series of significant adjustments to the U.S. defensive line in Asia. It is important to recognize that these adjustments came in two forms that are analytically distinct and should be considered separately. The first are adjustments in the force posture and/or military strategy for safeguarding U.S. interests. Prominent examples include the Obama administration's "pivot" (which sought to shift more military assets to Asia) and Richard Nixon's Guam Doctrine (which aimed to reduce the U.S. forward military presence in the region).

The second, more fundamental kind of adjustment involves a change in the scope of U.S. security commitments in Asia. As Green recounts, "the Truman administration drew the American defensive line very deliberately between the offshore island chain and the continent, including Japan but excluding Korea—which the North then promptly attacked" (p. 8). He notes that George Kennan argued strenuously that no part of the Asian mainland was a vital U.S. interest, but that there was little support for the view that the United States should not intervene in Korea. After the Korean War ended, South Korea came under U.S. military protection. The United

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NOTE ~ The author acknowledges with thanks comments from Daryl Press, Jonathan Markowitz, and Bill Wohlforth.

States' military footprint was later extended even farther into the continent during the Vietnam War. Green observes that Nixon was very receptive to Kennan's underlying viewpoint and sought "to limit American exposure on the continent of Asia, particularly after the bloodletting in Vietnam" (p. 339). Yet he notes that "whereas Kennan wanted the United States out of Korea in order to sustain a clearer maritime stance in the region and reduce the dangers of entrapment, Nixon was unwilling and unable to extricate the United States from the peninsula" (p. 340). After Nixon's decision to stand pat on the U.S. commitment to South Korea, no U.S. president has subsequently made any appreciable adjustment to the scope of the United States' security commitments in Asia (though Taiwan can be seen as a possible exception in light of the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979).

So where should the United States draw the defensive line in Asia now? Green does not outline his preferred formulation, but he correctly underscores that "the definition of the United States' forward defense line will become increasingly complex" (p. 545). As he notes, "the American forward presence in the Western Pacific is being challenged by China's military buildup and coercive claims to territories in the First Island Chain—and American strategists are debating whether the United States should be risking war over 'rocks' in the South China Sea, as one administration official put it in 2012" (p. 8).

Concerning the scope of U.S. security commitments, the United States would now seem to have four overall options. The first is to maintain the "status quo": to fully maintain the United States' roster of security commitments in the region on their existing terms. The second is to "do less": to pull back by cutting some or all U.S. security commitments. The third is to "do more": to add new alliances with countries such as Vietnam that are concerned about China's rise and are clamoring for security assistance. And the fourth option would be to "recalibrate": to maintain the current slate of security commitments but alter their overall scope to reduce the chance that the United States will become entrapped in a costly conflict that is not in the national interest.

In a previous coauthored book and associated articles, I outlined the many perils associated with the "do less" option and argued strongly in favor of pursuing the "status quo" option as part of continuing the United States' "deep engagement" grand strategy (one which features the maintenance of U.S. security commitments to partners in three core regions: Asia,

Europe, and the Middle East).¹ I have nothing new to add here regarding the respective costs and benefits of those two approaches. The “do more” option does not seem very probable, given the current nature of the U.S. political climate and its likely future. As a thought experiment, therefore, what I would like to do is to briefly examine the potential contours of the fourth remaining option—“recalibrate.”

China has not achieved anything like a global balance of power with the United States; and even if it were to try to become a true peer in the military realm, it would not be able to do so for many decades in the future.² But as Green correctly underscores (pp. 528–32, 545–46), China’s rise is real at the regional level: due to its dramatic investments in anti-access/area-denial, the United States’ surface fleet can no longer operate safely near China’s coast. This raises all sorts of new thorny questions for U.S. strategic planners:

- Should the United States risk war over rocks, features, or islands that are claimed by allies and subject to territorial disputes?
- Should the United States risk war over the fishing or mineral rights of its allies?
- How much risk is the United States willing to accept regarding China’s ability to destroy U.S. surface vessels?
- Should the United States seek to ensure that China cannot even temporarily interrupt the flow of seaborne commerce in the region?

U.S. strategic planners have invariably evaluated new vexing questions such as these in isolation. An alternative approach would be to step back and ask: to fulfill the core underlying goals of deep engagement, what are the truly essential U.S. foreign policy objectives in Asia (recalling that the strategy does not require “general stability” but merely “enough” stability to advance fundamental national interests in security, prosperity, and domestic liberty)?³ In this thought experiment, let me be bold and posit that there are only three such essential objectives in the military/security realm:

¹ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012/13): 7–51; and Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2013, 130–42.

² Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China’s Rise and the Fate of America’s Global Position,” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2015/16): 7–48.

³ The core goals of deep engagement are discussed in Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, chap. 4.

1. The United States must ensure that none of the “core territory” of its allies (which does not include the seabed resources and features in a country’s exclusive economic zone) is ever lost to China or any other potential adversary.
2. The United States must ensure that China cannot interrupt the flow of seaborne commerce over the long term.
3. The United States must ensure that a nuclear proliferation spiral does not occur in the region.

Setting aside the last of these three objectives for the purposes of this essay, I want to mention some thoughts regarding the other two. Regarding the first objective, there are two points to stress. First, the United States certainly can and should employ its economic, legal, and diplomatic toolkit to help its allies prevail in sovereignty disputes with China regarding fishing and mineral rights. But the U.S. military should not be actively involved in this issue; it should be used to assist allies only if their core territory is attacked (and it should be willing to risk the loss of surface vessels as part of such an effort). Second, President Barack Obama stated clearly in 2014 that the Senkaku Islands fall within the purview of the U.S.-Japan security treaty—this was the first time a U.S. president has overtly stated this. Now that the United States has made this particular pledge, Washington should honor it, but this should be the exception: the U.S. security guarantee should not be extended to any other unoccupied islands, features, or rocks claimed by U.S. allies.

Regarding the second objective, it is frankly hard to conceive that China would ever seek to interrupt seaborne commerce in the region (given how much the country depends on it) or use its military assets to extract a tax or tribute on seaborne commerce (given how small the rents would be compared with the costs and risks of securing them). Nevertheless, if that ever were to happen, the key is that the United States must ensure that China would pay sufficiently high costs such that it would not be able to sustain such measures over the long term. On this issue, it matters greatly that China has not achieved even close to a global balance of military power with the United States. Why? Because this means that Washington retains the option to undertake a distant blockade of China to force it to reverse course.⁴ And a distant blockade is an option the United States

⁴ A useful recent discussion is T.X. Hammes, “Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict,” Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Strategic Forum, no. 278, June 2012, 1–14.

will retain unless and until China attains a comparable level of long-term power-projection capacity. Given that China is not even currently seeking to develop many of the needed assets, and given that many of them take decades to successfully produce and effectively use, the United States will retain this option for a long time indeed.⁵

This list of three U.S. security objectives in Asia is a very spare one to be sure. Perhaps too spare. But it is a clear set of priorities, and it is doable. And these priorities matter immensely. If the United States were to only achieve these three objectives, then its presence in Asia would have accomplished a great deal. In turn, if the United States defines its security priorities in Asia too expansively, it may well find that it cannot be successful or that it has to bear very high costs. And if the United States does try to do too much and fails or pays costs that are too high, then the American public may well grow weary of any U.S. security presence in Asia. ♦

⁵ See Brooks and Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century.”

Author's Response:
This Time It Will Also Take More Than Providence

Michael J. Green

I am deeply grateful to the reviewers of *By More Than Providence* for their serious treatment of the volume and their intriguing and useful insights. I was gratified that all the reviewers not only accepted the boldest argument in the book—that a democracy like the United States is capable of grand strategy—but that several participants also expanded on that theme. Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi note, for example, that by acknowledging vacillation and inefficiencies over time, the book helps illuminate the enduring structural reasons for the United States' balance-of-power competition in Asia. James Holmes cites the work of Beatrice Heuser and Michael Handel to emphasize that states adopted grand strategies well before Clausewitz theorized on the subject, and they did so based on “common sense and logic,” something even preindustrial Americans possessed in droves. All the reviewers stressed the importance of using history as a guide for a strategic rebalance to Asia as China challenges the current U.S.-led order in the region.

Not surprisingly, several of the reviewers questioned whether such a grand strategy is possible in the era of Donald Trump. I will confess to feeling relieved that I tied together the themes of the book with a closing examination of Barack Obama's “pivot” to Asia and then went to print just before the 2016 election. The Obama administration was strategic enough to reinforce the book's leitmotif of U.S. balancing but also dysfunctional enough to allow a return to the thematic glue of the five tensions that have vexed U.S. statecraft toward Asia for two centuries. In contrast, writing a concluding retrospective chapter around the disruptive and unpredictable Trump administration would have been a real challenge. And yet the history of U.S. statecraft toward Asia does provide a useful and relatively dispassionate framework for considering how much change and continuity the administration really represents.

Does President Trump have a “grand strategy”? His critics argue that he has repudiated seven decades of deep engagement in the Asia-Pacific and has squandered, if not actively dismantled, instruments of U.S. power

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ranging from diplomacy to trade to support for democracy. His supporters argue that disruption and unpredictability are the ways and means he employs to achieve a better deal for the United States, measured in terms of bilateral trade deficits and allied defense spending. Thus far, however, the critics have the stronger case. If one focuses primarily on agency, this president represents a seismic shift.

However, structure also matters. Trump's surprise election did not represent a popular mandate for protectionism or isolationism vis-a-vis Asia. In polls taken by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the Pew Research Center, and others, Americans' support for global engagement, trade, alliances with Asian states, and immigration actually increased in 2016 and 2017.¹ Moreover, Trump's national security team (the National Security Council, State Department, and Defense Department) arguably has the most cohesive view of the China challenge of any core grouping of national security strategists in decades (although Trump's trade team may have the least cohesive vision since Herbert Hoover's administration). The current National Security Strategy accurately characterizes the structure of international relations in Asia by emphasizing the emergence of great-power competition with China. Arguably, another Republican president's or Hillary Clinton's National Security Strategy would have had the same premise. The administration's "free and open Indo-Pacific strategy" lacks for details, but it is a durable framework anchored in a coalition of like-minded maritime democracies and a great improvement from earlier flirtations with a U.S.-China condominium based on Xi Jinping's "new model of great-power relations." As Ashley Tellis warns, "the United States has invested heavily in seeking a relationship with China that advances its larger strategic interests, but these efforts have repeatedly fallen short." One could argue that for all its faults, the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy is evidence that we may have learned that lesson.

Of course, Donald Trump himself rarely refers to either the National Security Strategy or the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific and appears more often to take his cues from the "America first" vision of his campaign. Nevertheless, I would argue that on balance we have entered an unprecedented period of disruption and unpredictability at the top rather than a new trajectory in core American thinking about U.S. interests in

¹ See, for example, Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, and Craig Kafura, "What Americans Think about America First," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 2, 2017 ~ https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/ccgasurvey2017_what_americans_think_about_america_first.pdf.

the Asia-Pacific. Grand strategy is a meta-process and most of the strands have not fundamentally changed.

That may be small consolation for the reviewers, several of whom rightly point out that the United States cannot afford such incoherence at a time of rapid geopolitical change in Asia. This is not the first time U.S. strategy toward the region has suffered from drift. In the past, the United States has paid a heavy price for poor grand strategy, as the veterans of Bataan, Task Force Smith, and the Tet Offensive can attest. At other times, presidents have quickly recovered, as Reagan did after Carter's retrenchment and Bill Clinton did midway through his own initially chaotic presidency. It is not clear whether President Trump will make similar adjustments. He has been far more impervious to the normal feedback loop from allies, adversaries, and domestic interest groups that caused earlier presidents to adjust their initial strategic assumptions—though the consequences of a trade war or failed talks with North Korea could change that.

At the same time, the United States has enjoyed some fair winds in recent years. Investment from Asia into the energy-rich U.S. economy may partly offset the disastrous decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. And to Adam Liff's point that strategies must be judged in part on their impact on allies' choices, it is striking that major U.S. allies and security partners (in particular, Japan, Australia, and India) are almost all still choosing closer integration with the United States rather than defecting to a Sino-centric order or pursuing autarky. Bismarck's quip that God holds special providence for small children and the United States of America may still have some truth to it.

Providence will clearly not be enough, though. None of the prior challengers to U.S. interests in the Pacific—not the Europeans, the Japanese, or the Soviets—presented the complexities of a China that is attempting to return to the center of Asia rather than beat the United States to it. As Stephen Brooks notes in his essay, defining the forward-defense line in Asia is becoming particularly difficult in the face of growing Chinese capabilities to deny access inside the first island chain and to threaten U.S. bases as far as the second island chain. In his essay, Brooks offers three objectives that should guide where we draw that line today: (1) protecting the core territory of allies, (2) securing seaborne commerce, and (3) preventing nuclear proliferation. John Lewis Gaddis writes in his new book *On Grand Strategy* that holding a defensive line without becoming overextended takes "steady nerves" and the ability to watch "smoke rise on horizons you once controlled

without losing your own self-confidence.”² Brooks’s criteria for defining the forward-defense line in the Pacific are rooted in the geography of the offshore island chains while covering intangibles such as the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. It is a good list to help steady our nerves in the face of Chinese maritime coercion.

But now President Trump has exhumed an older debate about the United States’ forward-defense line in Asia by stating his preference for eventually removing U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula. He may have support from some Pentagon planners who are looking at the complexity of the China challenge and quietly questioning whether we should leave forces tied down on the peninsula to defend an ally that might not be on our side in a longer-term confrontation with China. He could also have unlikely assistance from progressives around Moon Jae-in who are pushing for the early return of wartime operational command to South Korea in pursuit of greater autonomy from the United States. These are not mainstream views in either capital, but it is worth remembering that Mahan and Kennan both warned against entanglement on the Asian continent. In that sense, the National Security Strategy and the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific may be just a little too Mahanian for their own good. I worry about President Trump and Korea the most because the peninsula has been a blind spot in U.S. grand strategy so often in the past.

If the administration’s National Security Strategy is right that geopolitical competition with China is the largest challenge to U.S. interests in Asia, then the long history of Sino-Japanese-Russian conflict over the Korean Peninsula would suggest that the U.S. alliance with South Korea is pivotal to maintaining a favorable balance of power in Asia as a whole. Retreating from the peninsula in a myopic effort to consolidate the defense line for longer-term maritime competition with China would only encourage China to consolidate its own maritime flank and target other U.S. alliances such as Japan. Perhaps Brooks’s list should be expanded to include a fourth criterion: the integrity and credibility of the U.S. alliance system in Asia, which Beijing recognizes as the center of gravity for the United States’ strategic influence in the region. Indeed, if the point of grand strategy is to win the peace and ultimately encourage more productive Sino-U.S. relations, then we should not let planning for worst-case scenarios with China define the importance of our alliance with South Korea.

² John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 54.

I suspect that President Trump may make this one of the biggest strategic debates about Asia in the years ahead.

The readers of *Asia Policy* should not despair or shy away from that debate. As Campbell and Doshi emphasize, *By More Than Providence* demonstrates that strategic innovation has often occurred during the most fallow periods of U.S. engagement with the region. The United States became a Pacific power in 1898 because a handful of expansionists made the case for an oceangoing navy and forward presence during the inward-looking 1880s; Japan's maritime empire was taken down in 1942–45 by campaign plans developed to compensate for severe budget cuts and arms control agreements in the 1920s; and Soviet expansionism in the Pacific was reversed in the 1980s based on a vision of using the Japanese archipelago to threaten the Soviet Far East that was hatched in the post-Vietnam malaise of the 1970s. So there is yet hope. I would like to think that future historians might even look at this exchange in *Asia Policy* as early evidence of yet another strategic turnaround during a time of dangerous drift. But time is short. 