



# Journal of Social and Political Sciences

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**Cangara, A. R. (2022). China's Responses towards The US Pivot to Asia: "The Dialectics of Hedging and Counter-Hedging." *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, 5(3), 55-61.**

ISSN 2615-3718

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1991.05.03.363

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

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Published by:  
The Asian Institute of Research

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# China's Responses towards The US Pivot to Asia: "The Dialectics of Hedging and Counter-Hedging"

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## Abstract

The US pivot to Asia, which encompassed the strategy of shifting the US focus on deploying the strategic-military, diplomatic, and economic assets to the Asia-Pacific region, had generated enormous debates among scholars and Chinese state officials. Such development then raises questions about their responses to such a US strategy in Asia. In regards to this question, this article evaluates that the US pivot to Asia had devised two primary responses in mainland China, ranging from hardline and moderate stances in Chinese scholars and officials. The hardliners stood for perceiving the US pivot to Asia as a strategy to contain China's rise, which has multiple potencies to trigger an open confrontation. In contrast, the moderates viewed the US pivot to Asia through the elements of cooperation and competition. Despite these contentions, this article argues that the US pivot to Asia had further triggered China's increasing military, diplomatic, and economic capabilities. It also sees the Sino-American relations through dual track reciprocal relations comprising the competitive-negative and cooperative-symbolic elements which had been restraining each other from going into open conflict yet were still tensioning. Therefore, to further analyze China's responses, this article will simultaneously use the concept of hedging and the "use of force" by Art and Jervis.

**Keywords:** US Pivot to Asia, China's Rise, Sino-American Relations, Hedging, Balancing and Engagement, Chinese Scholars and State Officials

## 1. Introduction

After coming to power in early 2009, the Obama administration declared the US "return to Asia". After this announcement, the US made serial diplomatic manoeuvres such as frequent state visits by the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Asian countries, signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and participating in the East Asia Summit (EAS). Subsequently, in late 2011, the Obama administration institutionalized and crystallized its statecraft as the grand strategy of "the US pivot to Asia" or "the US rebalance to Asia" (Manyin 2012, 1). Through the US pivot to Asia strategy, the US explicitly announced that it wanted to reinforce its role in the Asia-Pacific region by shifting its strategic-military, foreign and economic policies focus toward Asia.<sup>1</sup> In his Presidential remarks to the Australian Parliament in November 2011, President Obama emphasized that the US would play a more significant and extensive role in moulding the future directions of the

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<sup>1</sup> The context of the Asian region was set to encompass Australasia, Southeast Asia, and the coastal areas of South Asia and East Asia.

Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, the US National Security Advisor explained the fundamental goals<sup>2</sup> of this policy was to advance the US interests in the region (Donillon 2011). Essentially, this strategic shift to Asia was motivated by several crucial developments, ranging from 1) the shift of world economic gravity towards the Asia-Pacific region; 2) the rise of China's strategic, military, and economic might, which were followed by its assertiveness over its territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific region that might obstruct the freedom of navigation and the US power projection in the region; and 3) reassurance of the US allies in Asia in regards of the American credibility and leadership. Following these developments, since late 2011, the Obama administration had materialized the US pivot to Asia strategy by 1) increasing its military presence in the Asia-Pacific broadly and flexibly<sup>3</sup>; 2) sustaining and reemphasizing its participation in East Asia Summit (EAS); and 3) advancing the realization of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as the US-Led Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the Asia-Pacific region (Manyin et al. 2012, 1-2). Concurrently, the implementation of the US pivot to Asia has also generated huge concerns and enormous debates in China over its consequences on China's position in world politics. As a result, it has been responded to by both state officials and scholars differently. Pertaining these distinctive responses, the concept of hedging<sup>4</sup> which comprises the "balancing and engagement" policies, then would be best to interpret the action and reaction of Sino-American relations regarding the US pivot to Asia strategy. While the US pivot to Asia is considered a hedging strategy towards China, China's responses per se are a counter-hedging strategy (Hemmings 2013). The article will further analyze these hedging and counter-hedging relations through strategic-military, economic, and diplomatic realms. In the strategic-military and economic realms, Sino-American relations are considered more competitive, and meanwhile, in the diplomatic realms, their relations are viewed to be more cooperative. In addition, the concept of "the use of force" (Art & Jervis 2007, 141-147) is also used to explain the Sino-American relations in the strategic-military realms. The US strategic-military pivot to Asia is perceived to cultivate the deterrent use of force against China. On the other hand, China per se capitalizes the defensive and swaggering use of force. Accordingly, this article explores further the dialectics of hedging and counter-hedging in US-China relations in the context of China's response to the US pivot to Asia strategy.

## 2. Method

This article employed an argumentative qualitative research method based on the concept of hedging strategy and the use of force in international politics, which is briefly explained in the introductory part of the article, aiming to discuss the conflictual and engaging relations between the US and China through the framing of dialectics of US-China hedging relations. With this aim, the research for this article was conducted through literature reviews, acting as a data collection method for analysis exploration related to the issue discussed. The data collected was mainly from intensive and extensive internet research to find secondary references that include journals, news, reports, books, China and the US official government websites, and other kinds of literature that might be helpful to sharpen the article analysis.

## 3. Results & Discussion

### 3.1 China's responses to the US pivot to Asia: Strategic-Military Realms

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Donillon further explained that the US fundamental goal in the pivot to Asia consisted of engaging in the process of norms and rules construction in the Asia-Pacific region, assuring the state's compliance with the international laws and norms, ascertaining that the commerce and freedom of navigation are not obstructed, encouraging the emerging power to build confidence and trust with their neighbouring countries, and any disagreements in the region are settled by peaceful means and avoided any threats or coercion from happening.

<sup>3</sup> The US pivot to Asia in strategic-military realms is pursued by strengthening the military capacity of its formal alliances and strategic partners in the Asia Pacific, such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, and Singapore, through extending the number of troops deployment, naval deployment, as well as constructing new dimensions of military cooperation. In detail, this was done by deploying up to 2,500 rotational troops at Darwin, Australia, 40,000 troops in Japan, 16,000 floating troops near Japan, 28,500 troops in South Korea, and 500 rotational troops in the Philippines, and 4,500 troops in Guam. Additionally, the US also stationed four of its littoral combat ships in Singapore. Moreover, The US also notified the international community of its plan with Australia to allow greater access of the US Navy and the US Airforce towards the Australian naval base at Perth and Royal Australian Air Force facilities at any bases, respectively. These increasing military activities involved 1,850 aircraft, six aircraft carriers, 143 navy ships, six landing ship docks, four amphibious transport docks, 11 cruisers, 13 frigates, 31 destroyers, and 36 submarines.

<sup>4</sup> Essentially, the hedging concept means that the states take a risk by simultaneously undertaking two contradictory policy directions towards another state through balancing and engagement. The states do balancing as a preventive measure for the worst scenario (e.g. maintaining a robust military capability (internal balancing) and establishing and reinforcing alliances (external balancing)) and coincidentally preparing for the desired result through engagement (e.g. expanding and deepening diplomatic relations, establishing trade blocks and networks, and forming binding regional and multilateral architectures).

The US pivot to Asia triggered two significant responses in mainland China: the hardline and the moderate responses in Chinese scholars and officials. These responses were backdropping by several preceding cases which involved China and the US coincidentally, such as the US arms sale to Taiwan in 2010, the US military joint exercise at the sensitive sites in the Asian-Pacific region, and the US intervention in the South China Sea disputes (Wang & Yin 2014, 67-70). After announcing the US Pivot to Asia in 2011, the debates in mainland China were even further intensified as the US relocated 60 percent of its military power in the Asia-Pacific region (Bakrie 2013).

Initially, the response of mainland Chinese at the beginning of the US strategic turn to Asia came from Dai Qingcheng (2009), that criticized the US policy in the realist paradigm. He argued that the US military alliance enhancement with Japan and South Korea was the strategy to contain China's rise through encirclement and blockading. Following its institutionalization as the US pivot to Asia strategy, it was also then harshly criticized by Liu Jiangfei<sup>5</sup> (2010) as a form of containment circle by portraying the placement of the US military bases surrounding China's outer edges<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, harsh criticism was also conveyed by Maj. Gen. Luo Yan from PLA. He perceived the US joint military exercises under the US pivot strategy as a form of intimidation to mainland China. He even reaffirmed that there was a potency for China to draw its "sword" and exert graver repercussions than just flexing muscles if the US continued its military drills near the territorial boundaries of China (Wang & Yin 2014, 72-76). These hardline-realist-confrontational perspectives and responses were paramount among the Chinese strategic circles, both scholars and officials. They perceived the US pivot to Asia as a zero-sum game and a strategy to perpetuate its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific.

In contrast to the hardliners, the moderates saw their reactions exaggerating the problems. The moderates argued that the US pivot to Asia was not a threat to China. For instance, Shen Dingli<sup>7</sup> (2009) argued that China should not be worried about the US pivot to Asia as the US per se has lodged to the multilateral security architecture in the region. He further emphasized that there would be no containment by the US if China is still on its track to peaceful development. Another scholar, Yuan Zheng<sup>8</sup> also argued that the US shift to Asia was not targeting China's rise, but it was just a way to deal with pressing regional issues, such as North Korea's nuclear proliferation and territorial disputes over the East and the South China Sea. He contended that the US just wanted stability in the region to assure that there were no obstructions to commerce and freedom of navigation (Wang & Yin 2014, 66). The meeting between President Obama and Xi Jinping in June 2013 reinforced moderate stances. Subsequently, after the meeting, Chinese officials explained to the broader public that Sino-American relations were good (Sutter et al. 2013, 2). Wang Yi, the current Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in his speech in Davos 2014, also reaffirmed that China had no problem with the US pivot to Asia strategy. He viewed that the US and China could cooperatively and constructively engage in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, he even proposed a possible new model of major-country relationships to deal with the overlapping interests and problems that occurred along the way (Zhang 2014).

Regarding the responses of the hardliners and the moderates, both state officials and scholars, it is found that the moderate responses are more predominant than the hardline responses. However, China's responses in the context of the US pivot to Asia in strategic-military realms are going beyond that contentions. They are neither confrontational nor moderate, but they are better to be understood as a competitive-negative relation in the element of hedging strategy. Essentially, the US pivot to Asia had been the strategy to deter China's assertiveness in the South China sea over its territorial claims (Krepinevich 2015, 78). Consequently, this US strategy released a sense of insecurity and perception of the possible US containment of China (Johnson 2015). As a result, the US pivot to Asia triggered China to increase its military capabilities. Concurrently with the intensified US pivot to Asia, the Chinese government expedited its military hardware modernization by increasing its spending on the annual military budget. In 2015, China increased its military budget by 10%, which reached around \$145 billion. China became the second largest military spender after the US (Wong & Buckley 2015). Nevertheless, China was

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<sup>5</sup> Li Jiangfei is a foremost military expert in China and a Modern Navy associate editor (PLA Affiliated Military magazine).

<sup>6</sup> The US military bases surrounding China's outer edges span Japan, South Korea, Guam, Australia, and the Indian Ocean.

<sup>7</sup> Shen Dingli is a foremost scholar in international relations and the Center for American Studies Director at the University of Fudan.

<sup>8</sup> Yuan Zheng is a senior research fellow at the Institute for American Studies, Chinese Academic of Social Sciences.

different. It increased its military capabilities for the defensive and swaggering use of forces. Moreover, it did not intend to deter the US but to balance the US hedging strategy. At this juncture, China's reactions could be said to be a form of internal balancing against the US pivot as it emphasized improving internal military capabilities against the perception of external threats. This China's reaction could be seen in China's military parade on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, which had been reckoned to be the most successful one. China sent several messages to its citizens and international communities through this parade. First, the military parade depicted China has modern military capabilities that can defend its national interest. It also leveraged the national pride and dignity of the Chinese, who had experienced a century of humiliation by Japan and Western powers. Second, China can be a great competitor of the US military. Interestingly, it also announced its cuts by 300,000 on its troop personnel through the parade. It had sent a message that its military might would not be a threat to the other countries in the region. It was how China showed its benign gesture to reduce its neighbour's suspicions and reassure them of its peaceful future (Chen 2015). For China, having a good profile and international image has been paramount for its future role in world politics (Shambaugh 2015, 99). Coincidentally, this had also indirectly countered the US pivot strategy, which provocatively labelled China as assertive.

Therefore, in the strategic-military realms, it is clear that the US implemented a hedging strategy by increasing its military presence in the region to deter China. Meanwhile, China countered the US hedging strategy competitively through internal balancing, comprising the efforts to modernize its military hardware and consistently increase its annual military expenditures. These sorts of Sino-American relations are not confrontational yet tensioning toward the international politics in the Asia Pacific.

### *3.2. China's responses on the US pivot to Asia: Economic Realms*

A critical part of the US pivot to Asia strategy was advancing broader regional integration agenda in Asia-Pacific through TPP. The Obama administration had focused on the TPP to advance its international economic relations in Asia, particularly in trade and investment. Similarly, the US economic pivot to Asia through TPP has also stimulated great debates in China in economic realms.

In economic realms, mostly Chinese scholars took hardline stances by criticizing the possible negative impacts of the TPP on China's economic rise. They argued that the TPP had just posed a challenge to China's efforts to advance regional integration in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, TPP was the way for the US to maintain its economic grip in the region by weakening China's economic cooperation and political influences with the countries in the region (Wang & Yin 2014, 78). Gu Guoda<sup>9</sup> even argued that the US economic pivot was a containment strategy towards China's rise and intended to alter the existing regional economic architectures in the Asia-Pacific region. Tang Guoqiang<sup>10</sup> even harshly labelled the US behaviour in the TPP as a "selfish hegemon" (Ye 2014).

Contrasting the hardline stances, Wang Zhile<sup>11</sup> argued that China should join early and actively participate in the TPP negotiation process. He believed it would assist China in bolstering the momentum of its institutional economic reforms. It was also crucial for avoiding marginalization and acquiring a more significant say in shaping the rules of international economic and trade governance (Wang & Yin 2014, 79). Nevertheless, this argument was too biased toward the US position. Chinese officials shared the more moderate stances. Initially, the Chinese officials were also suspicious and doubted the US intention of advancing the TPP process. Nevertheless, in the latter development, Chinese officials took an open and flexible position toward TPP (Xiaotong 2014). The Chinese Premier Li Keqiang reaffirmed that China was open-minded toward the TPP despite its activism in advancing Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiation. He asserted that TPP and RCEP could run parallel despite their distinctive features. For him, this case was similar to how RCEP coexisted with China's existing Free Trade Area (FTA) with ASEAN and South Korea. The most important thing for China is how these

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<sup>9</sup> Gu Guoda is a Chinese economics scholar from Zhejiang University.

<sup>10</sup> Tang Guoqiang is the Foremost International Economist from Fudan University.

<sup>11</sup> Wang Zhile is a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, which affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM)

regional economic integration initiatives augment the trade liberalization and economic globalization in the region following the rules of the WTO (Financial Times 2015).

The responses, as mentioned above, of the Chinese officials and scholars were contradictory. Nevertheless, they were essentially the same. The Chinese officials showed the international communities its sober-minded profiles and benign gestures through their cooperative attitudes toward the TPP, though they were just rhetorics and symbolics. The sense of competition innately existed in China's regional integration agendas. Regarding the TPP, China balanced it by promoting the RCEP with the ASEAN countries. Moreover, from 2013 to 2015, the Xi Jinping administration initiated an economic breakthrough in expediting broader regional integration and economic liberalization agenda, such as The New Silk Road initiative, which encompasses the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)<sup>12</sup> and the Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) (Wang 2015). Besides those two new initiatives, China also revived the Free Trade Area of Asia and the Pacific (FTAAP) initiative and intensified the negotiation of bilateral FTA agreements with its neighbour (Rabena 2015). The most important thing to be notified in the regional integration agenda is actually about inclusion and exclusion. It is found that the TPP negotiation excluded China. Meanwhile, the RCEP, down to the New Silk Road and AIIB initiatives, excluded the US (Fensom 2015). This development shows how China responded competitively to the US economic pivot to Asia. China reaches the European markets through the New Silk Road initiative beyond the Asia-Pacific region. In this initiative, China focuses on encouraging greater interconnectivity and infrastructure. Compared with the TPP, the New Silk Road initiative has overstepped it as the Xi Jinping administration seriously pushes the realization of the initiative through robust financial backups from the AIIB.<sup>13</sup> China, by far, had committed to subscribe a \$50 billion initial fund to the AIIB (Boten 2014). It had also allocated a particular "Silk Road Fund" valued at \$40 billion to address the infrastructure projects along the belt and road (The Economist 2015). Xi Jinping's active push towards all the initiatives mentioned above could be perceived as China's economic hedging towards the US and would fundamentally undermine the existence of the TPP and American economic leadership and influence in the region.

### *3.3 China's responses to the US pivot to Asia: Diplomatic Realms*

The quiet relaxing part of China's responses to the US pivot to Asia would be in diplomatic realms as both the US and China engaged constructively through the entangling bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. Through the pivot to Asia strategy, the US per se bolstered its engagement in the Asia-Pacific region's regional security and economic institutions, such as EAS, ARF, and APEC (Manyin 17, 2012).

Regarding the US diplomatic pivot to Asia, President Xi Jinping welcomes the US constructive engagement in advancing prosperity, stability, and peace in the region as long as it respects China and other countries' concerns and interests. Moreover, China's former Premier Wen Jia bao considered that the US pivot to Asia did not corrode China's external environment needed to continue its peaceful development. Such diplomatic constructive engagement could be seen in the open and flexible responses towards the US of the China-US formal dialogues, which reached more than 90 formal dialogues (Sutter 2013, 16). In addition, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his address to the 69<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), also reaffirmed that the issue areas of US-China cooperation have been widening and deepening. Therefore, they must be dealt with constructive and cooperative engagements by both the US and China (Glaser & Vitello 2015, 1-2).

The engagement element of hedging within Sino-American relations was intensified in the diplomatic arenas. China and the US even engaged in multilevel diplomacy, which covered multilateral, regional, and bilateral diplomacy. Through these ways, they sought opportunities to expand and deepen their cooperation despite competition in the strategic-military and economic domains. In fact, at the beginning of Obama's second term of administration, he intensified the US's high-level engagement with China by sending its top officials to Beijing to

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<sup>12</sup> The SREB aims to link China with Europe via Western and Central Asia. Meanwhile, the MSR aims to link China with Southeast Asian countries, Europe, Africa and South Pacific via the South China sea.

<sup>13</sup> The AIIB will finance the infrastructure projects under the New Silk Road initiative to encourage excellent connectivity and diminish trade barriers in the region. The AIIB articles of the agreement have been signed by 57 countries, including those with a formal alliance with the US, such as Australia, France, Germany, Italy, the UK, Kanada, New Zealand, and South Korea.

strengthen the relations (Sutter 2013, 16). Furthermore, the engagement level went to a higher level through the Presidential Summit between Obama and Xi Jinping at Sunnylands, California, in June 2013 (Glaser & Vitello 2013, 1). President Obama continued to conduct this summit again in 2014, and on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, he hosted Xi Jinping to discuss and deliberate the issues impacting the interests of the US and China on bilateral, regional, and global levels (BBC 2015). Reciprocally, Obama also visited China in 2014 through a regional platform such as APEC Leaders Meeting 2014, which the Chinese government hosted. Due to these simultaneous meetings, China and the US reached several agreements ranging from Confidence Building Measures (CBM) on the military, visa extensions, information technology, and climate change (Glaser & Vitello 2015, 1). Both are also engaged in the Group of 20 (G20) at the global level. The recent deal that China and the US had made through the G20 mechanism is tackling climate change effects by capping and deeply reducing their emissions by 2025 (Taylor & Branigan 2014).

#### 4. Conclusion

The US pivot to Asia had been a critical issue in mainland China as it had stimulated various responses and rigorous debates about its impact on China's international politics and economic relations. The Chinese scholar's responses were pretty balanced between those who took a hardline position by arguing that the US pivot was the strategy to contain China and those who took a moderate position by arguing that the US pivot did not target China and believed in the inherent competitive and cooperative element of the US pivot to Asia. Meanwhile, the Chinese government's responses could be paradoxical as it had flexible attitudes, welcomed the US pivot to Asia, and will deal with the US constructively. However, China's behaviours toward the US pivot to Asia had been so competitive. In strategic-military domains, China strengthened its military capabilities through military hardware modernization and increased its military expenditures annually as a practical response to the increasing US military presence in Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, in economic domains, it also progressively pushed new economic initiatives such as the New Silk Road and AIIB as the responses to TPP. These developments clearly show that the US pivot to Asia triggered China's increasing military, political, and economic might instead of limiting China's capacity to rise and develop. Overall, these Sino-American relations have been understood in the dialectics of hedging and counter-hedging, which cover the contradictory policy directions of "balancing and engagement" between China and the US.

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