



Why Can't America Contain China? | Ask The Professor

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John Mearsheimer: Hi, this is John Mearsheimer. And I am here today to answer another question from a channel member. This question comes from @GuanWang-n2g. And his or her question is: "The Obama administration announced a pivot to Asia in 2011 and presented it as a major reorientation of US strategy toward the Asia-Pacific. Yet Washington subsequently seemed unable or unwilling to devote the resources necessary to fully implement the strategy. Why did this happen?" There's no question that in 2011, the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the pivot to Asia. And there's also no question that the United States did not pivot to Asia in any meaningful way until 2017 when President Trump moved into the White House. Now, let me explain what's going on here. When you talk about the pivot to Asia, you're talking about moving toward a containment policy toward China. It's just very important to understand that. You're pivoting militarily to Asia for the purpose of containing China. And I should say, by the way, we're not talking about Asia here, we're talking East Asia. We're talking about pivoting to East Asia, to contain China. Now, in roughly 1990, China was economically a quite weak country. It's why China was not considered a great power. And what happens over the course of the 1990s is that the Chinese economy grows by leaps and bounds. And then in 2001, China joins the World Trade Organisation. And that's roughly ten years before Hillary Clinton announced the pivot to Asia. Almost everybody agrees that once China joins the World Trade Organisation in 2001, its economy is really going to take off. And its economy really does take off, on top of all that growth you had in the 1990s. So by the year 2011, the Chinese economy is roaring along. And China is headed toward becoming a great power, because it's going to have the economic wherewithal at some point in the not too distant future to build the military forces that are necessary to qualify as a great power. And it's this thinking about China as a potential competitor, as another great power, that motivates Hillary Clinton to enunciate the pivot to Asia.

But the fact is that in 2011 when she makes this policy pronouncement the United States is actually pursuing a policy of engagement with China. It's trading with China, it's investing in

China, and it's helping China to get rich. So it's very important to understand that an engagement policy is fundamentally different than a containment policy, which is to say that an engagement policy is fundamentally different than pivoting to Asia. And the fact is that Clinton Secretary of State and Obama as President was unwilling to pivot to Asia in any meaningful way and instead continued the policy of engagement because the feeling was at the time that China was not yet a great power and therefore there was no justification for moving to a containment policy. Now, as I alluded to before, this all changes when Donald Trump comes into the White House in 2017. Independent of Trump's arrival in the White House, China, by about 2017, has become a great power. It's very important to understand that all that economic growth between, let's say, 1990 and 2017, had created a situation where China was wealthy enough that it could generate significant military forces that would qualify it as a great power. And as many of you know, in 2017, the United States moved out of the unipolar world into a multipolar world. China and Russia by 2017 were great powers.

Well, given that China, is a great power by 2017, by roughly 2017, it's hardly surprising that at that juncture Trump decides that he is going to abandon engagement, which had been the policy favoured by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, and Trump is going to adopt in a very overt way a containment policy, which is another way of saying he was committed to pivoting to Asia. So the pivot to Asia, although it's enunciated in 2011, doesn't really begin until 2017. Now, let's talk a little bit about what's happened to the pivot since 2017. There's no question that in Trump's first term, which ran from 2017 to January 2021 the United States moves to implement the pivot to Asia, and we adopt a quite impressive containment policy toward China. But during the Biden years, and then during the second Trump term, which starts January 2025, that pivot begins to weaken. What happens is, under the Biden administration in February of 2022, we get deeply involved in the Ukraine War, which shifts our focus to Europe in a major way. And then under President Trump, on February 28th of this year, we get deeply involved in the Iran War. And what this means is that when you think about the three areas of the world that are of strategic importance for the United States, one is the Persian Gulf, two is Europe, and three is East Asia, right, East Asia is the most important area of the World after 2017. We're pivoting to Asia because East Asia is of such strategic importance because of course that's with China. The threat is located.

But what happens in the Biden administration and then in the second Trump administration is that we become bogged down in the Iran war and in the Ukraine war. And that limits our power ability to pivot to Asia. And in fact, I would argue that after the Iran war starts, what the United States does is it begins to pivot away from East Asia, because we need to move forces out of East Asia to the Persian Gulf region to wage war against Iran. We move an aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington, we move a Marine Expeditionary Unit, we move Patriot missiles and we move FAD missiles. And assorted other weaponry out of East Asia to the Persian Gulf. In other words, what we're doing is pivoting away from East Asia, which in my opinion is a huge mistake. And it goes to show what a disastrous blunder the Iran war was, or the decision to enter the Iran War was, and what disastrous blunder it was to, in effect, push the Russians into a war over Ukraine, which of course started in February 2022. So what you see here, when you put all the pieces together, is that Hillary Clinton and

the Obama administration enunciated a pivot to Asia in 2011. That did not happen. We stuck with engagement until 2017. And then President Trump actually abandoned engagement, adopted containment, which is another way of saying he adopted the pivot to Asia. He put meat on the bone starting in 2017 when he moved into the White House for the first time. But since then, under the Biden administration and the second Trump administration, the pivot to Asia has, in a very important way, turned into a pivot away from Asia, which is clearly not in the United States' interest. That concludes my comments on this excellent question. And I look forward to the next question from a channel member in the near future. Thank you.

END

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