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Article:	President Trump's China Policy: An Offensive Realist Strategy?
Author(s):	Syed Muhammad Saad Zaidi Ph.D. Scholar International Relations, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan
	Dr. Adam Saud Dean, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan
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Author(s) Note:	Syed Muhammad Saad Zaidi is a Ph.D. Scholar in International Relations, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan Email: saadz93@hotmail.com
	Dr. Adam Saud is serving as Dean at School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

Over the years, where the United States' (US) foreign policy has predominantly propagated ideas towing the liberal line, such as peace and prosperity, stability and security, democracy and defense; the manifestation of these principles have always been conducted through hardcore realist traditions; might makes right, shrewd military dominance and economic strong-arming. Though, the US foreign policy always had a soft tone to it, as if it was serving the greater good. Thus, was overwhelmingly accepted by other states. However, for the first time in history, under President Trump, the US has adopted a foreign policy regime which clearly tows the offensive realist principles, especially vis-à-vis China. Now, the US has adopted 'economic isolation,' deliberately instigated a trade-war, opted out of meticulously negotiated multilateral agreements; Trans-Pacific Partnership, Paris Agreement, Iran Nuclear Deal etc., threaten to disband NATO, and purposely escalated tensions with China; which all negate the soul of the liberal world order, which the US promulgated and intends to sustain. This paper shed lights on the foreign policy initiatives undertaken by the Trump regime vis-à-vis China, especially how they negate the preceding US strategies.

Keywords: Trump Presidency, US Foreign Policy, Offensive Realism, Containment of China

Introduction

The foreign policy of a state vis-à-vis another state succeeds in achieving set goals if the policymakers conduct a careful and rigorous study of the domestic conditions of that state and the geo-politics. If a foreign policy is based on a careless and inadequate analysis, then it incurs catastrophic consequences. For instance, in the 1930's, the British regime misjudged Hitler's ambitions. In the 1960's, the then US President, Lyndon B. Johnson, completely miscalculated North-Vietnam's resolve. Throughout the course of history, starting from ancient Greece and Rome, such miscalculations are repeatedly witnessed.

For almost two decades, the US misunderstood China's strategic objectives. The US was of the view that China would eventually integrate in the US-led liberal world and emerge as a responsible partner. However, lately, China has been projecting hegemonic ambitions. Nevertheless, President Trump, after coming into power, has adopted an 'offensive realist' strategy to somehow curtail China's rise and prolong the 'uni-polar moment.'

Offensive Realism

Almost seventy years ago, Hans J. Morgenthau presented the theory of 'realism' to study International Relations. Since then, this theory has withstood steady assaults from external quarters, like 'liberalism' and 'constructivism,' as well as a divisive tendency. However, with time, splinter groups, like 'neo-realism' (1978), 'neoclassical realism' (1998) and 'offensive realism' (2001), emerged, each having an identifying adjective to herald some new variant or emphasis.

John J. Mearsheimer put forward the theory of 'offensive realism' as a critique to Kenneth Waltz 'defensive realism.' (Snyder, 2002) Offensive realism predominantly focuses up on Great Power politics, especially how the status quo power(s) use all resources in hand to

curb/minimize threats posed to its hegemony. (Snyder, 2002) Following are the primary assumptions of offensive realism:

1. The primary goal of a state, especially a Great Power, is to somehow maximize its relative power.
2. A never-ending power struggle is witnessed among states. This power struggle is not driven by the hedonistic nature of human beings, but the anarchical international structure forces states to search for security.
3. Pursuit of power and security is insatiable.
4. A state may consider itself secure when it is in a position to safeguard its primary interests over a reasonable time span.
5. The international structure greatly incentivizes states to hunt for opportunities in order to accumulate power at the cost of rivals.
6. Wars and conflicts are recurrent phenomena, as states are never satisfied with their power, they keep wanting more power, which in turn bounds them to collide with one another.
7. A state having a power advantage over its rivals will most definitely behave in an aggressive manner, then one facing a more powerful opponent. As Thucydides said, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” (Schake, 2017)
8. States recognize that the only way to ensure security is to become the leader of the pack, achieve the prestigious status of ‘hegemon.’ Thus, up to a certain extent, eliminating any threat to its core interests.

According to Mearsheimer, no state can achieve global hegemony, but the US is the only Great Power, which has attained the status of regional hegemon. (Mearsheimer, 2003) As it has

had total control over the Western Hemisphere, but not on other regions like Asia. The US in order to maintain its hegemony will pursue a strategy of balancing in which it will take extreme precautions to prevent other state(s) from disturbing the balance of power. (Mearsheimer, 2003) In case if the aggressor is not peacefully deterred, the US will use its military power to prevent the aggressor from upsetting the balance of power.

In a nutshell, 'offensive realists' argue that the anarchic global system gives no option to states but to compete for power and maximize their security, the two pre-requisites for survival of a state. For a state to ensure its survival, it must become the most powerful state, establish its hegemony. Firstly, states seek regional hegemony than global hegemony. As states grow their perceived threat grows too; thus, no amount of power is sufficient.

President Trump's China Policy

Even before being elected as the US President, Donald Trump, during his Presidential campaign, repeatedly and bluntly criticized the then US China policy. He termed it as "allowing China to economically 'rape' the US." (Zurcher, 2016) Thus, vowed to hold China accountable for its misdeeds. The preceding successive US administrations; Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, all were committed to establish strategic ties with China and integrate it within the existing status quo, as in their opinion there existed significant areas of common interests between the two states. However, soon after taking office, President Trump, drastically changed the US approach towards China.

Now, no longer the US perceived China as a state that was ascending within the ranks of the international system, but as a challenger to the prevailing world order in general, and the US hegemony in particular. Thus, a paradigmatic shift has occurred to the US' China policy; from 'realists optimist' to 'offensive realists.' The Trump administration is following the two key

dictates of offensive realism; i) maximizing its power at the expense of rivals ii) proactively using all its resources to prevent the rise of a rival power.

Soon after coming into power, in 2017, the Trump regime issued the 'National Security Strategy,' which greatly stressed that China was forcing states to comply to its geo-political and geo-strategic agenda, especially within South-Asia, Africa and up to a certain extent in Europe and the Western Hemisphere; by effectively using its economic might, the infamous 'carrot (reward) and stick (punishment) approach,' and implied military threats. (*Experts on Trump's National Security Strategy (NSS)*, 2017) Also, China was directly responsible for the theft of American intellectual property worth 'hundreds of billions of dollars.' (*Experts on Trump's National Security Strategy (NSS)*, 2017) Furthermore, 2018's 'National Defense Strategy' explicitly termed China as a strategic competitor, which was using rapacious economics to compel its neighboring states, while militarizing the East and South China seas. (Grieco, 2018) Both these strategies clearly indicated that the US would now proactively deter China both, geo-economically and geo-politically, which is what 'offensive realism' advocates.

In August 2017, President Trump ordered the 'United States Trade Representative Office' (USTR) to conduct a comprehensive investigation into Chinese trade practices vis-à-vis the US. Consequently, steep tariffs were imposed by the US on numerous imports worth billions of dollars from China, which initiated a 'trade-war,' which China equally retaliated by imposing stringent tariffs on US imports. Over the past 19 months, since the trade-war started, the US has levied tariffs on roughly \$550 billion worth Chinese imports. (Wong & Koty, 2020) In retaliation, China has levied tariffs on approximately \$185 billion worth US imports. (Wong & Koty, 2020)

The Trump initiated trade-war has worked wonders for the US economy, its trade deficit with China has shrunk by 18 percent in just a year; in 2018, it was \$419.5 billion, while in 2019, it was \$345.6 billion. (Deng, 2020) Also, the trade-war forced China to open up its market for US companies, ended the compulsion imposed by Chinese companies in joint-ventures regarding technology transfer, and greatly limited the subsidies China could give to state-owned industries, which gave them an added advantage while competing globally. Furthermore, a recent report of 'Moody's' depicted that in the fiscal year 2019-2020, China's economy faced tremendous pressures as tensions with the US grow. The Chinese economy grew by 6 percent, in contrast to its predicted growth of 6.7 percent. (Lighthizer, 2017) The aforementioned facts and figures prove that the Trump initiated trade-war also made a substantial dent on the growth of the Chinese economy. The US re-strengthening its economy at the expense of its hegemonic rival is in line with the offensive realism philosophy.

The Trump regime has also taken actions against a few key Chinese firms. When Huawei, a Chinese telecom giant, allegedly evaded sanctions against Iran, the US swayed Canada to arrest Meng Wanzhou, Huawei's Chief Financial Officer, officially charged Huawei with fraud, and forced its allies to terminate its contracts with Huawei regarding 5G networks. (Keane, 2020) Also, 'ZTE,' another Chinese telecom firm, was penalized by the US. It paid a \$1 billion fine to continue with its operations. (Borak, 2018) The US proactively penalized both these Chinese telecom companies to somehow delay the launching of the much awaited 5G network, as it would give China an upper hand in the domain of 'Artificial Intelligence' (AI), and it would be easier for it to gain access to governmental classified information and commercial secrets. In February 2019, to put the US at a competitive advantage in the field of AI, the 'American AI Initiative executive order,' was signed by President Trump, which greatly

promotes investment in AI and R&D in partnership with academia, industry, global partners and allies. (Luo, 2019)

The Trump administration began started to mount a geo-economic response to China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Mike Pence, the US Vice President, termed it as, "constricting a belt, a one-way road." (Maresca, 2018) The US made it evident to the world that through BRI, China is inducing 'debt-trap diplomacy;' giving developing countries debt, which it knows is highly unlikely to be paid back by the developing states, then translating that debt into geopolitical influence. West's 'debt-trap' argument further gained credibility, when Mahathir Mohamed, the then Malaysian Prime Minister, not only scrapped \$23 billion worth BRI projects, but also cautioned China against propagating a new kind of colonialism. (Hornby, 2018) Furthermore, when the recipient countries of BRI projects are unable to pay back the debt, China forcefully takes possession of key strategic assets. For instance, China got the operating rights for Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka, for 99 years, when the cost of the project exceeded to such an extent, that Sri Lanka had no other option but to give up Hambantota's control in exchange for a much-needed bailout package.(Stacey, 2017) To effectively counter BRI, the US established a \$300 million 'security assistance' fund for the Indo-Pacific region. ("U.S. Pledges Nearly \$300 Million Security Funding for Indo-Pacific Region," 2018) Also, The US 'Overseas Private Investment Corporation' (OPIC) has already invested \$3.9 billion within the Indo-Pacific region. (Ford, 2020) Furthermore, the US has announced to work with Japan and Australia to provide alternatives to Chinese investment. (Ford, 2020) The US proactive opposition to BRI and starting alternative initiatives to ensure that BRI does not succeed is exactly what offensive Realism advocates.

In the last decade, within both the East and South China seas, China started projecting its military power. In this regard, China initiated the 'String of Pearls' strategy and assertively started to acquire more and more territory by building artificial islands, capturing islands and significantly increasing its naval presence. (Bitzinger, 2018) China's assertive policies forced the US to significantly enhance its boots on the ground to maintain regional stability and security as well as back its allies against growing Chinese imperialism. Thus, the US, under President Obama, decided that by 2020 it will station more than 60 percent of its Naval and Air Forces in the Asia-Pacific region. (Davidson & Dickey, 2015)

The Trump administration has continued with the Obama's administration philosophy regarding stacking up its forces in the Indo-Pacific to deter China's growing influence on regional security. In December 2016, the US navy deployed 273 ships in the Indian Ocean, by January 2019, this number has increased to 287. (Cooper & Poling, 2019) In the disputed South China Sea, during the Trump administration, the US navy has conducted more than 10 freedom of navigation operations, which are twice as many as during President Obama's 8 years tenure. (Cooper & Poling, 2019) Furthermore, noting the value of combat aircraft to conduct missions over the vast areas of the Indo-Pacific region, the US 'Indo-Pacific Command' has placed some of the most advanced warplanes; the F-35, the P-8 Poseidon and numerous 'Unmanned Aerial Vehicles,' commonly known as 'drones,' in addition to the long-range bombers. (Gady, 2019) In addition, in May 2019, the US has deployed its missile destroyer, USS William P. Lawrence, along with two Japanese warships in the geo-strategic 'Malacca region.' (Panda, 2019) The US building up its military might across the Indo-Pacific to curb China's rise is purely an offensive realist strategy, as the theory strongly advocates that the status quo power must use its military resources to curb the challenger state(s).

The US has also forged a strategic alliance with India (2009), to establish India as a counterweight to China within the region. (Raja & Tellis, n.d.) The Indo-US nexus has proved to be effective in containing China's influence within the region. For instance, China heavily invested in Myanmar to get direct entree to the Indian Ocean, avoiding the Malacca dilemma, but the Indo-US alliance were able to topple the pro-China autocratic regime and installed the pro-US regime of Aung San Suu Kyi. (Kesling & Emont, 2019) Furthermore, India did the US dirty work in Sri Lanka, where the pro-China Rajapaksa's regime, which ended the 26 year long civil war, was overthrown and a pro-US regime was established.

The Indo-US nexus by heavily militarizing the Indian Ocean and de-facto controlling all-important choke points, like Hormuz Strait, Strait of Malacca and the Bab-el-Mandab Strait, is hindering the expansion of China within the region. (Fernando, 2015) Furthermore, in September 2018, the US and India signed a treaty under which India will not only be sold advanced US weaponry, but also sensitive military technology will be transferred to India. (Withnall, 2018) In connection to this agreement, the then US Defense Secretary, Jim Mattis, said that the two largest democracies will continue to work together to make the Indo-Pacific region prosperous and freer. (Garamone, n.d.) Meanwhile, in 2017' budget, the US created an 'India Rapid Reaction Cell' (IRRC), which magnified the ever-increasing importance of India to contain China. The offensive realist school propagates the idea that the status quo power(s) uses all resources, including creating alliances, to curb the challenger state(s), Thus, US developing India as a regional counterweight to China is in line with offensive realism principles.

In a nutshell, the Trump administration's policies vis-à-vis China; geo-economic offensive strategies, geo-military dominance and establishing regional allies, like India, as counterweight's, all are indeed in line of the teachings of offensive realism. As offensive realism

is a theory that greatly focuses upon the dynamics of Great Power Competition; thus, using it to understand the US policy to curb China's rise is the rational choice.

Conclusion

The US policy orientation towards China can be categorized into four phases, since the creation of China (1949). In the first phase, the US tried and miserably failed to stop Mao Zedong from ascending to power. Consequently, relations remained hostile up till the early 1970's, were observed between the two states. In the second phase, the then US President Richard Nixon, with the assistance of Henry Kissinger, the then US Secretary of State, forged friendly ties with China, to deter the Soviet threat and end the Vietnam War. In the third phase, the US tried to integrate China in the global system, wishing that it emerges as a 'responsible stakeholder' within the US-led liberal order. The fourth phase has just begun, with the US fully realizing the threat posed by the rise of China; thus, taking immediate actions to deal with it effectively. Only time will tell whether the Trump regime's offensive realist strategy and its successors policies are up able to address this mammoth of a challenge posed by China to the US hegemony.

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