Introduction:

The United States plays a crucial role in the security environment and economic prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region. The United States remains the single most important national actor in the Asia-Pacific, a position that is unlikely to change for the next 10 years. Nonetheless, the US is facing an inevitable decline in its overall influence in the region as a result of factors both internal and external to the American political and economic systems.

The United States’ primary interest in the Asia-Pacific revolves around its strong economic ties to the region and its determination to maintain its dominant position on the world stage. The US is the economic linchpin of the global system. That is beginning to change, as new and important economic actors emerge, such as China, India, and the European Union. In the terms of military power, the US remains exponentially more powerful than any of its nearest competitors, and this is likely to stay the case well into the future. However, the efficacy of military power is extremely questionable, and American setbacks in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan have raised legitimate questions about the credibility and utility of the American use of force.

Most Southeast Asian states want the US to remain fully engaged in the region. As Hamilton-Hart has argued, most ruling Southeast Asian elites are predisposed towards favouring American regional hegemony for a combination of self-interested economic and political reasons. However, this situation is likely to change as other powers, notably China, begin to play
more powerful economic roles in the region. For ASEAN, the most desirable scenario is one in which multiple great powers compete for ASEAN’s attention and support.

The primary argument of this paper is that the US regional decline will be driven more by internal than external factors. The US is following domestic policies that are certain to have serious effects on its long-term viability and credibility. These internal policies are the product of long-term American ideological and historical forces. The American decline is largely self-inflicted, but it is unlikely to turn around anytime soon and its effects will be corrosive and long-lasting. Thus, no matter how intent most Asian states may be on the US maintaining a regional stabilizing role, the region will need to contend with the side effects of a US in decline.

A Brief Review of the History of the United States in the Asia Pacific:

The United States has been fundamental in shaping the history of modern Asia. In 1858, American ships under the command of Commodore Perry sailed into Tokyo Harbor, forcing Japan to open its borders to the Western world. These events precipitated the Meiji Restoration and Japan’s emergence on the regional and international stages. Commodore Perry’s intent was to secure Japan as a way station en route to China. The US joined European powers in exploiting and bullying China during that country’s “century of humiliation.” American businessmen deposed the monarchy of Hawaii, thereby facilitating Hawaii’s eventual acquisition as an American state and an important point for power projection. The Spanish-American War began in 1898. When it ended, the US controlled the Philippines. The Americans had promised Filipinos their independence; instead, the US began an occupation of the country that lasted – with the interruption of World War II – until 1946. Throughout the early part of the 20th century, the United States contended with Japan for control of the Pacific Ocean. This tension culminated in World War II, which ended with the American occupation of Japan.
The Cold War was fought on the battlefields of Asia. The Korean War (1950-1954, though it is still technically unresolved) was the first major conflict of the Cold War era, and cemented the American belief in a global communist conspiracy, directed by the Soviet Union. Until the Korean War, the Americans had been willing to regard the communist takeover of China as the product of the long-running Chinese civil war. After Korea, the US saw China as part of a coherent communist bloc. The Korean situation also caused the Americans to reconsider their approach to Japan. After imposing on Japan a Constitution that abrogated its right to a standing military, the Americans found ways around this prohibition in order to turn Japan into an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” for American forces in the Asia-Pacific and a reliable (and dependent) regional ally.

The United States facilitated the withdrawal of European colonial forces from Asia in the post-World War II era. ALBEIT INCONSISTENTLY – NOTE INDONESIAN SUSPICION OF US. American anticolonialism, however, was secondary to its fear of communism. The United States aided France’s efforts to reestablish the French Empire in Indochina and ignored friendly political overtures from Ho Chi Minh, the leader of Vietnam’s Communists. After the French defeat in 1954, the US sabotaged efforts to reach a political solution to the reunification of North and South Vietnam. In the 1960s, the US propped up the corrupt regime of South Vietnam against its communist opposition. The American phase of the Vietnam War ran from 1963-1973 and ended in an ignominious defeat for US forces.

Even before the war ended, the US had begun to reconsider its security role in the Asia-Pacific. The Nixon (Guam) Doctrine of 1969 gave notice that the US would no longer become involved in land wars in Southeast Asia. Regional states would have to fend for themselves, though with American strategic support. In 1972, the US opened diplomatic channels with
Communist China, without giving advance warning of its plans to any of its regional allies. This recalibration of American foreign policy and military power had a profound effect on how the non-Communist states of the region understood their own security and was a crucial moment in the evolution of ASEAN. (Yahuda)

The “San Francisco System” is a series of bilateral security treaties (most of them signed in San Francisco) which connects the United States to its various Asian allies. The US is the common center of a “hub and spokes” model of regional security, a privileged position that it continues to defend vigorously. The centrality of American power to the regional security architecture of the Asia-Pacific has led the United States to oppose most efforts at regional security institution building, in order to protect its dominant position. The US created the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1955. SEATO’s membership consisted of the United States, Great Britain, France, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of China (Taiwan), the Philippines and Thailand. South Korea and South Vietnam were dialogue partners. It is telling that only two of SEATO’s members were from Southeast Asia.

American opposition to, or lack of interest in, multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific stood in stark contrast to its encouragement of multilateralism in Europe. The United States viewed Europe as a region of the world that deserved to be treated with respect, and assisted in its return to global economic and political prominence. By contrast, the United States of the post-World War II era viewed Asia as populated by people who were racially and intellectually inferior to Americans. There was little sense of identification between United States and its Asian allies. While this consideration plays much less of a role today in explaining American wariness of Asian multilateralism, cultural and ethnic divergence remains a relevant factor in US-Asian relations. The US continues to present the promotion of its political, economic and cultural
“values” in Asia as a major motivating force behind its determination to maintain its regional “leadership”, considerations that are never raised in a European context. (Clinton)

The San Francisco System remains at the heart of the overall security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region. At the height of the Cold War, the United States had stationed more than 100,000 troops at military bases in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines and played an indispensable role in protecting the non-Communist states of the Asia-Pacific. Today, there are far fewer American troops in the Asia Pacific theatre, but the American presence is still prominent. The US remains politically, though not legally, committed to Taiwan’s defense, something that is the source of considerable friction between the US and China. More than 50,000 American troops remain stationed in Japan.

Historically, China, and other Asian states saw the American presence in Japan as a welcome restraint on Japan’s supposed militarism. However, by the late 1990s, China began to reconsider this sanguine view of the American military. Other Asian states remained comfortable with the important role the United States Navy plays in maintaining freedom of the sealanes and providing maritime security for the entire region. Without the American presence, Asian states would need to fill the US role. Given the unresolved territorial and historical disputes in the Asia Pacific, such a situation could lead to an increase in tension and even outright conflict, as illustrated by the tensions in the East and South China Seas.

The United States was essential to the economic success of modern Southeast Asia. During the Cold War, the United States provided a lucrative market for the export goods of its major Asian allies. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan rebuilt through their access to the American market. Other regional states benefited more indirectly. As Richard Stubbs has shown, some
Southeast Asian states utilized the economic windfalls resulting from the American wars in Korea and Vietnam to implement long-term development policies that facilitated their economic takeoffs. Singapore, in particular, proved adept at investing its profits from war and climbing the economic ladder. Other Southeast Asian states, such as Indonesia, were less able to manage their good fortune and experienced only temporary booms. In 1985, the US forced the Plaza Accord on Japan. This committed Japan to increase the value of its currency, the yen, relative to the American dollar. This agreement was meant to address the growing trade deficit between Japan and the United States by making American goods more competitive in Japan. Its effect was to cause Japanese business to move much of its manufacturing to Southeast Asia. This created a triangular relationship between Japan, Southeast Asia, and the United States, which continued to serve as the final destination of Southeast Asian-produced goods. This economic relationship led to the sustainable development of the “miracle economies” of modern Southeast Asia.

The end of the Cold War precipitated a number of changes in the United States’ approach to its economic and security relations in the Asia-Pacific. The administration of George H. Bush opposed various efforts to create new multilateral security institutions in the Asia-Pacific, fearing potential challenges to the primacy of the San Francisco System. The Clinton administration was not as concerned that regional multilateralism threatened American interests, so long as that multilateralism remained relatively weak.

The end of the Cold War altered the American approach to the economic development strategies of its Asian allies. The economic success of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan was based on their versions of an “Asian economic development model,” that allowed significant government intervention in the national economy and a close, collaborative relationship between government and business. During the Cold War, the US overlooked the fact that its Asian allies
were pursuing economic development strategies that were at odds with the ostensible liberal, free-market ideological position of the Americans. With the end of the Cold War, the Americans began to pressure the Asians to adopt American-style economic and political systems. The tension between some Asian states and the US over political issues resulted in the so-called “Asian values debate.” Some Southeast Asian leaders, notably Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore, argued that Asian peoples were more comfortable with “soft authoritarian” governments than people in the West. The Asian approach to human rights had created rapidly-developing states. This argument of Asian triumphalism came back to haunt its proponents only a few years later, with the onset of the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997-1999.

The Asian Economic Crisis and its Effect on American Standing in the AP Region

During the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997-1999, the United States made choices and adopted rhetorical, political, and economic positions that seriously undermined its overall position in the Asia-Pacific. These decisions worked to the benefit of China which, until 2010, successfully capitalized on the American mistakes to further its own regional goals and influence in Asia. However, China’s adoption of aggressive nationalism in 2010-forward provided the US with an opportunity to reassert its regional prominence.

The Asian crisis created a problem for the IMF. It had only recently published reports that argued Asia’s economic success was attributable to its willingness to follow IMF advice and move toward a neoliberal economic model. The collapse of the Asian economies placed the IMF in the difficult position of having to explain how its advice had led to an economic catastrophe that it did not see coming. Other Western commentators argued that “crony capitalism” was so endemic under the Asian system that it caused gross distortions in the operation of the
marketplace that misallocated resources, leading to property bubbles, the collapse of which precipitated the crisis. Asian commentators and economists responded that while there were definite problems in the Asian model, the depth and severity of the economic crisis was far out of proportion to the extent of those problems. The intensity of the crisis was due to the inherent instability of the world financial system devised by the Western powers.

The United States undermined itself in dealing with the Asian crisis in a number of ways. The Americans took considerable delight in the apparent collapse of an economic ideology that challenged their own economic orthodoxy. This led some Asian observers (most vocally, Prime Minister Mohammed Mahathir of Malaysia) to see the crisis as a concerted conspiracy by Western powers determined to bring down Asian competitors. The failure of the US to assist Thailand when the crisis started severely damaged the US relationship with that country, particularly in terms of trust and notions of reliability. The US did not seem to care what happened to a valuable and loyal Asian ally. IMF negotiators met with South Korean officials only after first consulting with officials from the US Treasury Department. The IMF package agreed to by South Korea included trade concessions to the United States that had nothing to do with the ongoing crisis. This fed the perception that the United States was a predatory great power willing to exploit Asian countries in their moment of need.

The US Clinton Administration had vigorously pursued opening international markets to American capital and investment. To the US, one of the rewards of its victory in the Cold War was its right to promote its economic system and interests on a global basis. The Asia-Pacific states learned very different lessons. The most important was that it could not rely upon the United States to protect it in the post-Cold War era. The US had become a major part of the problem. If the Americans would not accept that the international financial system was
inherently unstable and, therefore, dangerous to global stability—or, even worse, if they benefited from this situation—then Asians would need to develop ways to protect themselves from future instability. In the wake of the economic crisis, most Asian states implemented some serious reforms in the way in which they conduct economic activity, though we should not exaggerate the depth and scale of these reforms. Moreover, subsequent events in the United States underlined the inherent weaknesses of the American model. The economic collapse of the early 2000s, exemplified by the bursting of the dotcom bubble, cast the American economic boom of the 1990s in a different light. It demonstrated that a great deal of money could be made on the basis of an artificial economy and that the model of economic deregulation that the US had pushed around the world during the 1990s was inherently unstable and dangerous. The Enron scandal showed the extent to which the private sector in the US needed regulation in order to protect consumers from predatory practices. The collapse of WorldCom made a similar point.

GET DATES FOR THESE EVENTS. It became evident that if crony capitalism was a problem in Asia, it was at least as large a problem in the United States. Even after these collapses, the US failed to correct for the worst excesses of its form of capitalism. This failure to regulate and control rampant Western capitalism—in particular, the American financial sector—eventually precipitated the 2008 global economic crisis—the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The inability of the American political system to deal effectively with the fallout from the economic collapse has raised questions about the efficacy of American democracy.

**The George W. Bush Years: Triumph or Disaster in Asia?**

American scholars debate over how successfully the George W. Bush administration managed American relations with Asia. Some observers argue that the Bush administration handled
American relations with China the two Koreas and Japan very effectively. Southeast Asia was also important to the United States during this time, but largely as the so-called “second front in the war on terror.” As a result, the US neglected the interests and perspectives of Southeast Asia itself. This helped exacerbate a subtle shift in the “balance of influence” in the region from the United States to China. After 2010, American re-engagement and Chinese foreign policy mistakes have caused a counter-shift, but the US probably lacks the material and political capital necessary to regain its previous position of dominance.

After the September 11, 2001 Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the United States, US foreign policy focused all of its energies and efforts on combating international terrorism. The main focus for this “War on Terror” was the Middle East. However, Southeast Asia was the location of a number of Islamic fundamentalist movements which had potential connections to Al Qaeda. As a result, Southeast Asia appeared on the American radar screen as a new battlefield in the international struggle against Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. One of the effects of this shift was to reinvigorate American interest in APEC. After the struggle over trade liberalization in 1997, APEC had fallen on hard times, with the two sides of the Pacific unable to agree on APEC’s purposes and their own goals. The new security focus gave the organization something to do and helped to facilitate American regional leadership on the issue. However, it distracted the region from more pressing economic and security concerns.

The reaction of ASEAN states to the American war on terror was mixed. Initially, after the actual terrorist attacks, all of the ASEAN states were anxious to show their support and sympathy for the Americans. This began to change as the US responded to 9-11 by attacking Afghanistan. This measure met with some unrest and unease in Islamic countries like Malaysia. The situation became much worse when the United States launched an unprovoked and illegal
war against Iraq. Malaysia and Indonesia were adamant in their opposition to the American action. Singapore supported the United States, apparently accepting American justifications for the attack, or at least claiming to do so. Thailand was more ambivalent in its response, and appeared reluctant to accept American actions. The Philippines supported the US. In the end, the Philippines and Thailand contributed material support and personnel to the American war effort.

The responses of the different ASEAN states reflected their national strategic interests. None of the Southeast Asian states could afford to alienate the American military machine, from which most of them hoped to gain some kind of material support for their own internal conflicts.

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David Capie demonstrates that domestic social and political considerations were the major factors that determined how these different countries reacted to the American war. (Capie, 2004)

From the outset, Indonesia, had difficulties with the entire concept of the American “War on Terror” (WoT). After initially supporting the United States in the wake of the September 11 bombings, Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri came out strongly against American war in Afghanistan and then, subsequently, in Iraq. Megawati’s retreat was attributable to the influence of Islamic political parties within Indonesia, and her own dependence upon their support for her government’s survival. Within Indonesia, a Gallup poll revealed that 89% of respondents felt that the American attack on Afghanistan was morally unjustifiable. The Taliban government of Afghanistan was admired by some Indonesian Muslim leaders as a group that was trying to create a state based on Islamic principles. (Bourchier, 2006:170-175)

In this political environment, the Indonesian government refused to admit that Islamic extremists within its own country were a potential source of terrorism. It denied American and
Singaporean claims that Indonesia was becoming an international safe haven for terrorists. The Indonesian state was afraid that any actions taken against Islamic movements within the country could radicalize the larger population and undermine its own authority and ability to hold on to political power. In particular, the government could not be seen as acting at the behest of Americans.

Even after the Bali nightclub bombings of October 2002, the Indonesian government was still restrained in its ability to act against Islamic terrorism. It condemned terrorism in abstract terms, but it was unwilling to identify Jemaah Islamiya (JI) as the organization responsible for the actual bombings. Nonetheless, the Indonesian police moved swiftly against those believed responsible for the attacks, including Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, the founder and spiritual leader of JI, who was charged with treason. (Simon, April 2003:56) Ba’asyir’s conviction was later overturned on appeal, in part because the US would not allow Indonesian prosecutors access to some of the prisoners it was holding in American prison camps.

As the Bush administration finalized its plans to move against Iraq, massive demonstrations against the Americans’ planned war were staged in Jakarta. After initially wavering on whether or not to oppose the American war in Iraq, the Indonesian government came out strongly against the Bush administration. When the war started, Megawati’s government described the war as an act of aggression and Megawati even encouraged and praised Iraqi resistance. These comments elicited strong support at home, though they deeply disappointed the Americans. However, the Americans privately assured the Indonesians that they understood the difficult political position in which Megawati found herself.
Despite its rhetorical opposition to the American position in Iraq, cooperation between the United States and Indonesia over questions of terrorism and military relations continued and increased significantly over the next several years. In August 2002, the State Department announced American plans to provide Indonesia with more than $60 million in counterterrorism financing, most of which was directed to the police and military. After 1999, direct military to military ties had been suspended after the Indonesian army was accused of complicity in massacres in East Timor. Bush administration officials worked assiduously to lift these restrictions, eventually succeeding in late 2005. These efforts continued over the objections of human rights organizations. Between 2002-2004, the US provided Indonesia with more than $700 million in economic aid, including counterterrorism training for the Indonesian police forces. (Simon, January 2004:70) Indonesia was happy to receive military and economic aid, much of which it used to oppose Islamic separatist movements within its borders. Thus, despite its clear political opposition to the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Indonesia still reaped the benefits of an enhanced military relationship with the US.

In Malaysia, the situation was much the same. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, Malaysia provided strong rhetorical support to the United States. Indeed, the Malaysian government saw the Americans as moving much closer to its own position on questions of domestic security. Malaysian officials compared the American Patriot Act to their own Internal Security Act. Malaysia had long been concerned with the rise of radical Islam within its own borders, and the ruling party's (UMNO) main opposition arose from Islamic political movements. The Malaysian government had been accused of using its concerns with radical Islam to stifle political dissent. In the wake of September 11, the Americans were far less
concerned about human rights and political liberties, and far more willing to accept and support Malaysian government actions against Islamic movements. (Nesadurai, 2006; Sohdy, 2003)

Nonetheless, despite these common interests, the Malaysian government soon came to disagree with the way in which the Americans were conducting their conflict with Islamic terrorism. Malaysians were opposed to the war in Afghanistan, with the opposition party PAS even encouraging some of its supporters to travel to Afghanistan to support the Taliban. While the Malaysian government blocked these actions and used the opportunity to link the PAS to terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, Prime Minister Mahathir also condemned the American actions as the wanton killing of Muslims.

Malaysian and American cooperation continued throughout 2002, but public relations began to deteriorate with the publication of the American National Security Strategy. The NSA asserted the American right to “preemptive” (actually preventive) war. Australia’s Prime Minister John Howard also claimed the right of pre-emptive strikes against states that might harbor terrorists with hostile intentions to Australia. Howard’s declaration set off a diplomatic bomb. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir responded by condemning both the Americans and Australians for their willingness to interfere in the affairs of sovereign countries. (Acharya, 2005:211-215) The Malaysians took issue with the American approach to the WoT, in particular their refusal to address the “root causes” of terrorism. The Malaysians emphasized the role of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the American protection and support of Israel, as major contributing factors to Muslim anger. According to Capie:

Criticism grew appreciably harsher as the Bush administration expressed its determination to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein in the second half of 2002. American war plans not only threatened to spark further domestic unrest within Malaysia, but also challenged the fundamental norms of non-interference
and sovereignty Mahathir has promoted within the region. In a speech to the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in February 2003, Mahathir said the September 11 attacks had ‘removed all the restraint in the countries of the north. They now no longer respect borders, international laws or even simple moral values. And they are now talking of wars, of the use of military conquests in order to change Governments. [...] It is no longer just a war against terrorism. It is in fact a war to dominate the world’. (Capie, 2004:232)

Malaysia’s leadership was well aware of the larger implications of the American actions, and was willing to oppose those actions on the basis of moral and political principle – at least at the rhetorical level. However, as in the case of Indonesia, these sentiments did not translate into any significant political or security break with the United States. After September 11, American flights through Malaysian airspace (already more than 1000 flights annually) increased significantly. The American Navy visited Malaysian ports on a regular basis and the American military and Malaysian military continued to train together. Visits between high-ranking military and police officials on both sides continued. Law enforcement and intelligence ties between Malaysia and the United States, always strong, increased markedly after September 11. The United States chose Kuala Lumpur as the site for its Southeast Asia Regional Training Center for Counterterrorism. Many of these initiatives occurred in the interim period between September 11 and the American invasion of Iraq, before the Malaysian rhetoric against American policy increased considerably. Nonetheless, the United States and Malaysia maintained a very close security and military relationship even after the war in Iraq began. Malaysian political figures did not allow their distaste for the Bush administration’s actions to affect their national security interests.

The Philippines had been a strong and vocal supporter of the American “War on Terror” from the beginning. The Philippines benefited enormously from American gratitude, including
significant increases in American military aid to the Filipino military and other significant economic assistance. In October 2003, for example, US President Bush announced $340 million in an aid package to assist in the training of Philippines forces fighting Abu Sayyaf, an Islamic criminal gang with purported ties to Al Qaeda. (Simon, January 2004:68.) In May 2003, the US named the Philippines as a major non-NATO ally, a status that allows it even greater access to American military support. In January 2002, the United States sent 1200 troops as part of a joint task force to fight the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas. In November 2002, the two countries signed a Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA), which allowed the United States to stockpile essential equipment and support services in the Philippines.

The American decision to attack and invade Iraq was, initially, greeted with some concern in the Philippines. The Philippines worried about the impact of the American invasion on its own Muslim population. It was also well aware of how the American action might affect international law and stability. However, these concerns were quickly set aside. For the Philippines, the American WoT proved to be an enormously beneficial engagement. Besides helping the Philippines in its ongoing conflict with Abu Sayyaf, the WoT allowed the Philippines to seek a rapprochement with the United States over political tensions that had emerged since the departure of the US from the Philippines in 1992. More importantly, the Americans offered invaluable assistance to the chronically under-resourced Filipino military. Indeed, maintaining the political support of the military was probably one of the most important motivating factors behind the Philippine government's decision to cooperate fully with the United States. The equipment received by the AFP from the US was not that useful in fighting Abu Sayyaf, but was useful in cementing the political support of the military. Finally, the Philippines probably saw
these agreements with the United States as balancing the rise of China's power in Southeast Asia and keeping the US engaged in the region.

Despite these clear advantages, the Philippine government did run some risk in getting too close to the United States. Public opinion in the Philippines on the United States is extremely mixed and very sensitive about the preservation of Filipino sovereignty. In February 2003, the Pentagon prematurely announced the deployment of 3000 US combat troops in the Philippines, an action that would violate the Constitution of the Philippines, which does not allow the operation of foreign troops on Filipino soil. This announcement sparked a massive nationalist backlash. President Arroyo was threatened with impeachment by her congressional opponents. The Pentagon immediately backed down, claiming that the troops would only be present as trainers.

Massive public protests in the Philippines erupted with the coming of the Iraq war. Some Filipino legislators feared that the American attack on Iraq would exacerbate conflict in Muslim sections of the country. Initially the Philippines sought a UN resolution to support the American war, but it declared its support for the US when the war came anyway, and joined the American “coalition of the willing”. The Philippines did not contribute combat troops but did express the desire to provide reconstruction support. President Arroyo was rewarded with more military and economic aid.

Thailand also initially offered an ambivalent response to the American war on terror. As noted by Connors, “Thailand's response to the Bush security agenda... has been somewhat uneven, suggesting some level of disquiet about its regional consequences.” (Connors, 2006:142) While Thailand did not express this ambivalence through formal diplomatic channels, a close
examination shows some significant differences between the US and Thailand. Immediately after September 11, Prime Minister Thaksin declared that Thailand would be “strictly neutral” in dealing with the American response to the terrorist attacks. According to the PM’s office, “our position is that we would not support any terrorist activities and we would not want to help the US in perpetrating war...”(Connors, 2006: 142) The government soon reversed itself, but continued to remain cautious in supporting the US. On the war in Iraq, Thailand was adamant that a solution should be pursued through the United Nations. When it became clear that the US would go to war regardless of UN support, Prime Minister Thaksin decided to support the US because Thailand was a longtime American ally. But Thaksin also stated that Thailand “… Can only urge them (the US) to be cautious and minimize civilian casualties, targeting only military installations.”(Connors, 2006: 142) By the middle of 2003, Thailand offered troops for humanitarian reconstruction in Iraq, deploying those troops in September.

Thailand admitted that its only interest in Iraq was in maintaining its alliance with the United States and there were strong suggestions that Thailand had acquiesced to American pressure. Within Thailand itself, there was considerable opposition to the American war from the public, academia, and within Thailand's parliament. The Foreign Affairs Committee made several points against the war: it argued the US was waging an offensive war in Iraq that violated international law; it declared that the government had used a constitutionally questionable executive decree to deploy Thailand’s troops; and it expressed concerns that that Thailand's involvement in Iraq would stir up Muslim nationalist sentiment in the South (Connors, 143).

Despite its apparent ambivalence about supporting the American war in Iraq, Thailand had many security and economic reasons for maintaining its relationship with the US. Thailand's military engages in multiple bilateral activities with the United States military. The most
important is the annual Cobra Gold exercise, which involves joint training and ensuring operational integration between the military, naval and air forces of the US and Thailand. In October 2003, President Bush designated Thailand as a major non-NATO ally, making Thailand and the Philippines the only states with that designation in Southeast Asia. The US and Thailand increased their security cooperation by working together on drug trafficking. In early 2001, Thailand and the US established the Counter Terrorist Intelligence Center (CTIC), which is heavily supported by intelligence from the CIA. The CTIC was instrumental in arresting Jemaah Islamiya members operating in Thailand and at capturing a reputed Al Qaeda figure. It is also involved in monitoring and responding to events in several Muslim majority provinces in the south of Thailand. Thailand allowed overflight rights for American planes flying to Afghanistan and Iraq and extended access to its bases to the Singaporean Air Force. Given the close connections between Singapore and the United States, this may have indicated a deeper Thai involvement in American strategy. Thailand benefited in the military and security areas from its decision to support the American war in Iraq. Reports from the time that this decision was made also indicated that Thailand, along with the other Southeast Asian states, was looking forward to benefiting economically from reconstruction contracts that it anticipated winning in the new Iraq. (Simon, July 2003:61)

Vietnam is an ASEAN state that was very strongly opposed to the American invasion of Iraq. Given the history of Vietnam this is hardly surprising. Nonetheless, despite its opposition to the American action, Vietnam was very careful not to aggravate its relationship with the United States. At the time that the Bush administration made the decision to invade Iraq it was also engaged in delicate economic negotiations with the government of Vietnam. Vietnam's major
national priority is on its economic development, a goal it cannot achieve without American assistance. (Simon, July 2007:73)

The one ASEAN state that was absolutely unequivocal in its support of the United States and its invasion of Iraq was Singapore. In a speech in Tokyo on March 28, 2003, Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong declared: “it is clear to everyone, unless that person wears blinkers, that this is a war to remove the weapons of mass destruction from Saddam Hussein.” Goh went on to claim that Singapore had to support the United States because “if weapons of mass destruction were to fall into the hands of terrorists, they could also become a threat to Singapore, which two years ago was targeted by a terrorist group.” (Cited in Acharya, 2005: 210)

In a more general sense, Singapore took the position that Southeast Asia would be affected by the instability and chaos that could be caused by the proliferation of WMDs. (Simon, April 2003:60) Goh also argued that the apparent opposition of Malaysia and Indonesia to American policies was really just a pragmatic response to the political realities within those two countries. He claimed that moderates in Malaysia and Indonesia were well aware that the war against Iraq was not a war on Islam. He noted that in both countries, the governments had either insisted that demonstrations against the war be moderate (Indonesia), or had banned all demonstrations except for the one organized by the government itself (Malaysia) (Simon, April 2003: 60).

Singapore offered a number of other justifications for its support of the American war. It argued that Iraq had violated many UN resolutions. By 2007, as the American occupation of Iraq was experiencing its most dire setbacks, Singaporean PM Lee Hsien Loong continued to encourage the American war. He argued that American credibility was at stake: to retreat from military confrontation would undermine American credibility and encourage other extremists to challenge US power and the international order. (Simon, July 2007:72) Shortly after the
American invasion of Iraq, Singapore signed a free-trade agreement with the United States, leading to speculation that support for the war was Singapore's way of ensuring that the FTA would go ahead. Singapore denied this linkage.

Historically, Singapore has tied its security to the persistence of the American presence in Southeast Asia. Even though the United States did not designate Singapore as a major non-NATO ally, as it did Thailand and the Philippines, Singapore may be the US’s closest ally in Southeast Asia. Since 1990, when Singapore and the United States signed a Memorandum of Understanding, Singapore has provided the US with access to its ports and naval and air bases. When Subic Bay, the American naval base in the Philippines, was closed in 1992, Singapore increased American access to Singaporean naval resources. Singapore provided support facilities to American military aircraft and naval vessels at the start of the war in Afghanistan. In October 2003, the leadership of the United States and Singapore announced that the two countries would work toward a Framework Agreement for the Promotion of a Strategic Cooperation Partnership in Defense and Security. This framework agreement would increase bilateral cooperation in counterterrorism, counter proliferation of WMDs, joint military exercises and training, and other contacts. Singapore is aware that its close ties to the United States may increase the likelihood of it becoming a target of terrorism. However it believes that fundamentalist Islam is the most significant threat to its regional and global security. (Acharya, 2006: 209)

The fact that the US managed to maintain and even enhance many of its military relationships in Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia led some American commentators to argue that the Bush policy in the Asia-Pacific was a success. However, the situation was not this simple. The foreign policy of the United States under the Bush administration led to a precipitous decline in American moral legitimacy and international standing due to the policies of the
government in the Middle East. The US war in Iraq, in particular, had a profound effect on American relations with the rest of the world, most obviously with its traditional allies in Europe and Latin America. In Asia, the political leaders’ response to the American situation was, much more muted and pragmatic, though the Asia-Pacific as a region was largely neglected by the Bush administration

T.J. Pempel notes three areas in which the Bush administration undermined America’s standing in Asia. The first was in the nonmilitary aspects of American relations with Asia, particularly in the realm of public opinion. While it is easy to dismiss the importance of public opinion in Asia and focus only on state to state relations, it remains the case that public opinion does matter, particularly in states where democracy is taking on greater importance. Under the Bush administration, the perception of the United States among the citizens of the world plummeted to new lows, including in Asia. This is a reality that has important implications for American “soft power.” Secondly, the Bush administration’s economic policies weakened the United States’ overall economic position in the world and empowered American domestic political blocs that favored economic policies detrimental to American-Asian relations. Finally, and most significantly, the Bush administration launched a concerted attack on the multilateral institutions of the global system and largely ignored Asian efforts at creating multilateral structures. The first decade of the 21st century saw the proliferation of Asian multilateral regimes that excluded the United States. The US strengthened its bilateral relations with its major Asia-Pacific allies. However, this was only one dimension in a much more complex regional environment.

When George Bush came to power, he was surrounded by individuals who favored the unimpeded exercise of American power. Even before September 11, the new United States
foreign-policy proceeded from the assumption that the United States, as the world’s sole remaining superpower, had the right to act outside of multilateral institutions when those institutions impeded the exercise of American power. These tendencies became far more pronounced after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Initially, the United States responded to these attacks by putting greater emphasis upon multilateral institutions. However, it soon became evident, particularly with American designs to invade Iraq, that the Bush White House had not changed its stripes. If anything, the situation became worse. The Americans, already inclined towards the use of force, used the September 11 attacks as an excuse to unleash American military power. The extreme militarization of American foreign-policy, a road the Bush administration had already been heading down, now became the norm. The American decision to attack and occupy Iraq was part of a larger ideological scheme designed to reshape the Middle East into a region that would favor American interests. The neoconservative ideology underpinning these ambitions probably did have some desire to bring “democracy” to the people of the Middle East. However, it was an ideology that was ignorant of history, the influence of nationalism, the sectarian divisions throughout the region, the way in which the United States was actually perceived in the region, and the legitimate grievances underpinning the Arab-Israeli conflict. PERCEPTION OF US AMONG THE ORDINARY PEOPLE. The consequences of the American actions were profound. The American attack on the very foundations of the international system created real possibilities for fundamental instability. While most great powers were on record as opposing the American action and its supposed justification in international law, the fact remains that any action undertaken by the United States opens the door on similar actions being undertaken by other countries. The US tried to claim that its actions were uniquely justified, but this claim was easy to dismiss. The United States undermined the
very international system that it had been instrumental in creating and which had advanced
American interests since the end of World War II. These objections, however, made no impact
on the Bush administration.

As it turned out, the United States came to learn a number of difficult lessons regarding
the limitations of its own power. The occupation of Iraq quickly turned into a dismal failure.
The US was left needing the support of its Western allies, most of whom were unwilling to
commit their forces to a war that they disagreed with and which was enormously unpopular with
their publics. The occupation was handled with a remarkable level of incompetence. For
example, key administrative positions in the Iraqi occupation headquarters were filled by
Republican political operatives, most of whom had no knowledge of Iraq or experience with
international affairs and no idea of how to fulfill their responsibilities. The inability of the
American military to control the relatively small insurgency in Iraq underlined the extent to
which military force was limited in its ability to fight modern wars. In both of these respects, the
myth of American managerial prowess was rudely shattered.

As noted, Singapore was concerned that the image of American military ineffectiveness
in Iraq would undermine the security guarantees that the United States provided to the Asia-
Pacific. The Iraq lesson may be that the United States is an effective military power in the short
term, but not in the long-term. Arguably, this was the lesson of the Vietnam War, and simply re-
learned in the context of Iraq. (And is in the process of being learned yet again by Western forces
in Afghanistan) This does have implications for conflicts fought in the Asia-Pacific, though the
lesson is mixed.\(^1\) The US deterrent power in Asia largely remains intact. The American ability to
deliver unacceptable damage to the militaries and infrastructures of any state opponent means
that American military power remains credible. In Asia, any power that would consider an open
conflict with the US has a great deal to lose. On the other hand, the American failure in Iraq offers succor to the region’s many insurgencies, which can take heart in the idea that any powerful military can be overcome using unconventional warfare techniques. Similarly, if the US ever did become engaged in an all-out war with another state the chances of that state repelling an American occupation are very high if the state can count on the support of the hard-core grassroots community.

As the Asia Pacific region exploded in multilateral initiatives, many of them led or facilitated by China, the US reinforced its military alliances in the region. This reflected the administration’s focus on the militarized notion of American power, and the underlying assumption that military power was really the only important power in the international system. The US largely ignored regional multilateral developments, or regarded them as irrelevant. American soft power suffered in other ways. The scandal of Iraqi prisoners being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq led to the revelation that the United States had adopted torture as state policy. The indefinite incarceration of suspects, the use of rendition to relocate prisoners to jurisdictions where they could be subject to torture, and the use of Guantánamo Bay as a Gulag for Muslims scooped up in various American wars eroded American soft power and made it much more difficult for the United States to promote human rights and other liberal democratic values in other parts of the world. In the context of Asia, these concerns were not serious obstacles at the official level. Nonetheless, some soft authoritarian Asian states noted the similarities between measures they took to defend their national security and what the United States was engaged in. At a deeper level, American commentators often speak of the United States promoting values in interaction with Asians. If American diplomacy is, in part, value-based diplomacy then American conduct affected its ability to promote those values.
The only multilateral institution in Asia that the Americans actively supported after September 11 was APEC. However, APEC became bogged down in the United States insistence on focusing its energies on terrorism rather than the economic initiatives that it was designed to address. This left many Asian leaders feeling that the entire APEC process had been hijacked by the American war on terrorism. The general sense that the United States was focusing all of its energies on the Middle East to the neglect of Asia was reinforced by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s decisions to miss the 2005 and 2007 ASEAN Regional Forum meetings. Her absence was duly noted by the Asian participants. President Bush postponed the 30th anniversary of ASEAN meetings that were scheduled between the US and ASEAN, a further indication of US interests and energies being directed elsewhere. At the same time, the US decided to pull out of various track two commitments that could, at least, have created the impression that it was engaged in Asia. Did Bush ever meet the ASEAN leaders? While the Americans neglected multilateralism in Asia, Asians proceeded to build numerous regional institutions, largely in response to the economic crisis of 1997-1999. Organizations such as the ASEAN +3 and its various associated initiatives were designed to create an Asian firewall against an unstable and American-run international financial system. China became the prime mover and shaker behind these initiatives and, for a time, was one of the primary beneficiaries of multilateralism in Asia.

Under George W. Bush, US relations with Southeast Asia were placed on an even keel where the government to government and military to military benefits for both sides were fairly obvious. During the Bush Administration’s second term, numerous foreign policy forced the Americans to recognize the real limits of their ability to shape the world through force. This does not change the fact that the image of the United States in the region declined precipitously. A
reasonable case can be made that American relations with official Southeast Asia actually improved between the Clinton and Bush administrations. However, the picture is more complicated when looking at US relations with Northeast Asia, and these relations have direct and serious implications for the states of ASEAN.

The Bush administration began its tenure with the decision to take a very hard line against North Korea. This evoked considerable hostility from the DPRK. Eventually, the Americans were forced to backtrack and adopt a more conciliatory stance towards the North when it became apparent that the hard-line approach was not working. The question of how to deal with North Korea greatly antagonized American relations with South Korea, particularly during the early part of the Bush administration. South Korea at the time was engaged in a “sunshine policy” approach to the North. The American dismissal of these efforts fed anti-Americanism and hostility in South Korea.

The Bush administration deemphasized its relationship with South Korea and put more emphasis on its relationship with Japan. The government of Junichiro Koizumi was more than willing to accept American pressure for Japan to take a more active military role in providing security for the Asia-Pacific. This dovetailed with Koizumi’s aspirations to make Japan a more “normal” country in the region. However, Koizumi’s nationalist bent, particularly his insistence on regularly visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, created considerable antagonism between Japan, China and South Korea. With US encouragement, Japan’s National Defense Planning Outline (NDPO) of 2004 explicitly identified China and North Korea as potential security concerns. Japan also agreed to fully participate in American efforts to build and deploy ballistic missile defense systems in the region, actions that were strongly opposed by China, which regarded this technology as a threat to its nuclear deterrent. At a meeting of the US-Japan Joint Security
Consultative Committee (JSC) in February 2005, Japan agreed to include Taiwan in its bilateral security planning with the United States, another move strongly opposed by China.

US moves to draw Japan more tightly into the American security agenda worsened Japan-China relations. These relations improved with the retirement of Prime Minister Koizumi and his replacement with successors who put a higher priority on smoothing Japan-China relations. As Pempel notes, US relations with China at this time can best be described as “schizophrenic”. When George Bush entered office, his administration took a highly antagonistic position towards China, regarding it as a competitor that needed to be controlled. Early signs were that US-China relations were destined for a very rocky path under Bush. This changed with the September 11 attacks. The US refocused on the Middle East to the neglect of Asia, and China was able to take advantage of the American preoccupation with terrorism to find common ground with the US in opposition to Islamic political movements. Nonetheless, when the US did turn its attention to Asia, it frequently adopted positions that indicated its ambivalence over how to deal with China.

The Bush administration’s mismanagement of the American economy turned a significant government surplus when Bush took office into a massive government deficit that continued to spiral out of control as the US became locked into two debilitating wars. Most of the turnaround in American economic fortunes began with the Bush administration’s decision to offer massive tax cuts to the most wealthy Americans and targeted subsidies to Republican Party supporters. These decisions reflected domestic political considerations but profoundly undermined the United States’ economic standing in the world and its ability to wield economic influence internationally. The Bush administration accumulated roughly 1/3 of total American government debt by the time its term ended in 2008. During this period, China and Japan became
the primary foreign holders of US debt. In theory, this development gives both of these two countries enormous potential influence over American economic and political decisions. The Bush Administration ended with the United States in a much more tenuous economic and, therefore, political position in relation to Asia than it was before the Bush era.

**The Obama Administration**

The Obama administration came to power in Washington with the benefit of enormous goodwill from the rest of the world. After eight years of George W. Bush, the world was ready for responsible and genuinely consultative American leadership. The Obama administration made it clear early on that it regarded Asia as a very important part of the world and that it intended to reengage the region as quickly as possible. Both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized that, with the new administration, the United States was “back in Asia.”

Secretary of State Clinton traveled to Asia almost immediately on taking office. In February of 2009, she visited Indonesia as part of the administration’s efforts to reach out to the Muslim world, to demonstrate that American interests in Asia were not just focused on China, and to reassure Southeast Asia that the United States respected the institutions and practices of the region. During this visit, Clinton became the first US Secretary of State to visit the ASEAN Secretariat. For the US, building a relationship with Indonesia was especially important, given that country’s prominent position in the Muslim world and its growing global importance as a member of the G20. On June 4, 2009, Obama gave a speech in Cairo, Egypt, that attempted to begin the process of repairing American relations with the Islamic world. In the speech, Obama singled out Indonesia as an example of an Islamic country that promotes religious tolerance and
gender equality. These efforts on the part of Obama and Clinton were part of an American campaign to address the significant global decline in American soft power that had occurred under the Bush administration. NOTE THE DECLINE IN US STANDING IN THE MIDDLE EAST. These efforts have met with mixed success.

The Obama administration also reconsidered American relations with Burma. The Americans came to the realization that Western efforts to force the Burmese government to reform were pushing the government more firmly into China’s sphere of influence. The Americans began a full review of their policy towards Burma and decided to push for a regional approach to Burma, modeled on the lines of the Six Party Talks on North Korea, which would involve ASEAN, China, India and Japan in finding a common policy towards Burma. The Burmese government did not make this easy. In preparation for national elections in 2010, the new Burmese constitution entrenched gender discrimination by excluding women from high office, an obvious attempt to prevent democratically-elected opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from running for elected office. In May of 2010, an American citizen named William Yettaw swam across the lake to the home of Aung San Suu Kyi, where she was being held under house arrest. Yettaw complained of cramping and exhaustion and Aung San Suu Kyi allowed him to stay at her home temporarily. The junta claimed that Aung San Suu Kyi had violated the terms of her house arrest and renewed her incarceration. These measures indicated that the government of Burma was not yet prepared to engage with the Western world. ASEAN issued a statement calling upon Burma to release Aung San Suu Kyi and abide by the terms of the ASEAN Charter. Burma’s response was to accuse ASEAN of “interfering in the internal affairs of Myanmar”, an action “not in conformity with ASEAN practice….”. (Simon, July 2009, 3).
On August 11, 2009, Suu Kyi was sentenced to an additional 18 months of house arrest for the Yettaw incident, a sentence that excluded her from the elections scheduled for late 2010. President Obama condemned this action as a violation of “universal principles of human rights.” John Yettaw was sentenced to seven years of hard labor. Yettaw’s sentence provided the opportunity for American Senator James Webb to go to Burma and negotiate the American’s release. While there, Webb met with Burma’s leaders and with Aung San Suu Kyi. Yettaw was released to Webb’s care. These gestures may indicate that Burma’s junta wishes to engage with the United States. Webb has argued that the US policy of isolating Burma has “allowed China to dramatically increase its economic and political influence in Myanmar, furthering a dangerous strategic imbalance in the region.” (Simon, Oct 2009, 3) The Obama administration subsequently announced that its Burma policy would continue with sanctions but would also allow American officials to engage with Burmese officials. Aung San Suu Kyi has offered to work with the Burmese government to get sanctions lifted.

NOTE BURMA REFUSES UN HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICIAL VISA TO ENTER COUNTRY. UPDATE THIS SECTION: THIS BEGINS A PROCESS WHEREIN BURMA ENDS UP REINCORPORATED INTO THE LARGER INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY.

On July 22, 2009, Secretary of State Clinton signed ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). The US had avoided doing this for many years due to the Pentagon’s concern that the treaty would compromise the US ability to exercise military power in the region. Clinton described the US signing of the TAC as an executive agreement that did not require U.S. Senate ratification. She argued that the TAC does not interfere with US defense obligations to its Asian allies if they are attacked. Simon notes that “(s)ignatories to the TAC frequently issue signing statements to that effect” and argues that “the TAC is more aspirational than obligatory,
which is true of many international agreements.” This interpretation of the TAC certainly has merit. However, it may also be downplaying the extent to which the TAC’s principles and obligations may be compromised if the document is viewed as merely “aspirational”. DEVELOP THIS FURTHER.

On January 12, 2010, Secretary of State Clinton gave a major address on the “Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities,” at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. She laid out the five guiding principles that the Obama administration would use to examine East Asian regionalism and the US role. (Cossa and Glosserman, April 2010). The stated principles represent little change from the stated position of the Bush administration or earlier American administrations. The differences will lie in the implementation.

The first principle is that “the United States alliance relationships are the cornerstone of our regional involvement.” American bilateral alliances are not irrelevant in the post-Cold War but are instead the foundation on which American participation in East Asian multilateralism will be constructed. Clinton asserted that the American commitment to bilateral relationships will enhance Asian multilateralism.

The second principle is: “regional institutions and efforts should work to advance our clearer and increasingly shared objectives.” In terms of security, these objectives include nuclear proliferation, controlling territorial disputes and military competition. In terms of economics, the Americans aim to lower trade and investment barriers, improve market transparency and economic growth. Politically, the Obama administration wishes to protect human rights and promote open societies. Again, these positions are common American rhetoric. MENTION TPP HERE?
The third principle is “our institutions must be effective and be focused on delivering results.” This focus on results oriented organizations is a consistent part of American foreign policy towards Asia. It is also the source of considerable acrimony between the US (and other Western countries) and the Asian states of the Pacific. The problems of APEC demonstrate this quite effectively. Clinton argued that “Asia’s rise over the past two decades has given the region an opportunity for progress that simply didn’t exist before.” Therefore “it’s more important to have organizations that produce results, rather than simply producing new organizations.” This approach to organization building indicates that the Obama administration will be putting pressure upon ASEAN and similar regional structures to produce concrete results and measurable outcomes. This probably means the US will be expecting binding treaties and more legalistic approaches to regional interaction. The problem with this approach is that most Asia-Pacific states, despite the enormous economic and political growth in the region over the past two decades, remain politically fragile and dedicated to a vision of Asian multilateralism that remains nonbinding.

The fourth principle is “we must seek to maintain and enhance flexibility in pursuing the results we seek.” The US reserves to itself the right to create informal arrangements to address specific problems where necessary. This approach, as noted by Cossa and Glosserman, sounds very similar to the Bush administration’s “coalitions of the willing.” A significant difference is that the Bush administration often deliberately undermined multilateralism on a global scale. The Obama administration has taken the opposite position, even though it still wishes to maintain American freedom of action. Whether or not this will be possible without incurring significant costs in soft power remains unclear, and depends on how the US chooses to act outside of international institutions and structures. If the US is seen as generally supportive of Asian
multilateralism and broader global structures then the occasional departure from international rules will probably be acceptable to the global community.

The fifth principle is of greatest relevance to ASEAN: “we need to decide, as Asia-Pacific nations, which will be the defining regional institutions.” Clinton cited The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and APEC as two organizations which the US deems worthy of continued support and participation. She also indicated that discussions were underway regarding how the US will participate in the East Asian Summit (EAS). NOTE ON CHANGING THIS – US JOINS EAS. Clinton’s selection of these three organizations is telling. APEC remains a major American priority. However, its focus on economics was undermined by the Bush administration’s preoccupation with terrorism. It is not clear that APEC is of relevance to most Asian countries today. ASEAN is delighted that the US supports the ARF. However, the ARF has come under significant criticism for not handling the most important security issues of the day. The organization will need to be significantly reformed in order to enjoy continued American support. The kind of intrusive reforms necessary will not be acceptable to many member states. In addition, ASEAN is presently attempting to make the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) a more expansive organization that will incorporate non-ASEAN members and deal more directly with security-related concerns. If this happens, the ADMM may begin to challenge the prominence of the ARF. Finally, the EAS remains amorphous. In ???DATE the US and Russia were invited to join the EAS and both accepted. To some commentators, (Dalapino) the US decision to join the EAS serves to reassure ASEAN of the US commitment to the centrality of ASEAN to regional institutional development. It also provides an opportunity for US presidents to visit states they may otherwise never visit. However, the significance of the EAS as an Asian multilateral institution remains unclear. As Kumar argues,
Asian states seem committed to building pan-Asian, not pan-Pacific institutions. The most important work of Asian multilateralism is going on within institutions that exclude the US, in particular the APT. As we have seen, China is dedicated to maintaining the APT as the primary regional institution for Asian states. With the US included in the EAS, it is likely that its presence will simply add to China’s determination to render the new organization largely irrelevant. Another consideration is whether or not the US President will have the time to attend yet another annual Asian regional forum. During his first term, Obama was forced to cancel planned trips to Asia several times due to domestic political crises, creating some tension between the US and its important Asian allies. FURTHER ARGUMENTS ABOUT EAS.

INFO ON OBAMA TRIPS, NORTH KOREA.

Efforts by the United States to improve its standing in the Asia-Pacific have been aided by North Korea. In May of 2010 the South Korean cruiser Cheonan went down off the coast of Korea with a loss of 49 lives. An international investigation concluded that the ship had been torpedoed by a North Korean vessel. This revelation led to further strain in North Korea’s relations with South Korea and its Western allies. However, this situation also put China into a very difficult position. Additionally, China agreed that it would wait for the conclusions of the international investigation and that it would support punitive actions against North Korea if the investigation concluded that the North was responsible for the disaster. However, once the final report was in, China appeared to step back from its earlier position. This development cast a pall over Chinese regional leadership. China’s inability to effectively stabilize the situation and its unwillingness to punish North Korea, as it had apparently promised to do, created a security vacuum in the region that only the United States can fill. The Cheonan incident helped to reinforce the US-South Korea ties. It had significant political repercussions in Japan, where the
new Hatoyama government was wrestling with its proposal to move an American Marine base on Okinawa. The retreat to the familiar comforts of the American security umbrella pushed Japan more firmly into the American orbit.

In July 2010, the United States made clear that it considers the South China Sea to be an American security interest. The US suggested that the regional states establish multilateral negotiations to deal with the territorial issues in the SCS, in contrast to China’s insistence that the issue be resolved through bilateral negotiations. This declaration caught China by surprise. It was greeted with considerable support and enthusiasm from most ASEAN countries, especially Vietnam. The American decision to insert itself into the South China Sea potentially creates another flashpoint (along with Taiwan) where the US and China can come into potential conflict. The American decision to get involved in the South China Sea reflects a number of considerations. First is the desire to check the growth of Chinese power and influence. The American action appears to be, in part, a response to pressure from Southeast Asian countries who want an American security guarantee, or at least presence, in their dealings with China over the SCS. The proximate causes of the American decision may have been China’s efforts to intimidate Exxon, in order to prevent it from signing deals with Vietnam on the exploitation of the Paracels. The Americans have argued that the South China Sea accounts for $5.3 trillion in bilateral annual trade, $1.2 trillion of which is American. This creates a legitimate American interest in maintaining open and peaceful sea lanes in the South China Sea. (NYT, Nov 15, 2011) The American declaration, while angering China, sent the signal to the states of Southeast Asia that the United States remains determined to continue playing a fundamental security role in the Asia-Pacific.
The US continued its reassertion in Asia-Pacific in 2011, even as China faltered in its “charm offensive.” President Obama announced that 2500 American Marines would be stationed in Darwin, Australia, for the first time in?? years. The Americans also began to play a major role in regional multilateral organizations. even as China began to pull back. According to Carlyle Thayer, the US “… turned the multilateral tables on China.” (NYT, Nov 15, 2011). In 2011, the US participated in the East Asian Summit (EAS) for the first time.

Once again, Hillary Clinton wrote important articles and gave speeches explaining what came to be called the “Asian pivot” in American foreign policy, an effort to reorient US foreign-policy and military attention to the Asia-Pacific region and away from the Middle East and Central Asia. Clinton recognized Asia-Pacific as “as a key driver of global politics.” (Clinton, FP,2011). She recognized that regional architecture was taking shape in the Asia-Pacific that required American participation if the Americans intended to continue practicing global leadership deep into the 21st century. She compared the construction of Asian regional architecture to the benefits that accrue to the United States from its role in creating a “transatlantic network of institutional relationships”. Clinton emphasized the fact that American prosperity depended on its access to Asia’s economies. She emphasized the American interest in stopping nuclear proliferation and maintaining commerce in the region. She acknowledged that many American allies question whether or not the US can remain committed to the Asia-Pacific or will it be distracted by events elsewhere in the world. According to Clinton “(t)he answer is: “We can and we will.”:

Just as Asia is critical to America’s future, an engaged America is vital to Asia’s future. The region is eager for our leadership and our business—perhaps both more so than at any time in modern history. We are the only power with the network of strong alliances in the region, no territorial ambitions, and a long record of providing for the common good. Along with our allies, we have underwritten regional security for decades – patrolling
Asia’s sea lanes and preserving stability – and that in turn has helped us create the conditions for growth. We have helped integrate billions of people across the region into the global economy by spurring economic productivity, social empowerment, and greater people-to-people links. We are a major trade and investment partner, a source of innovation that benefits workers and businesses on both sides of the Pacific, as host to 350,000 Asian students every year, a champion of open markets, and an advocate for universal human rights.

The Obama Administration’s Asian initiative was meant as the beginning of a long and permanent American engagement in the Asia-Pacific region, one that will continue to be implemented by future administrations across party lines. The American strategy was to undertake a sustained commitment to Asia through “forward-deployed” diplomacy – i.e., building and maintaining an American diplomatic presence in “every country and corner of the Asia-Pacific region.” The Americans intended to proceed along “six key lines of action”: by strengthening their existing bilateral security alliances; deepening their working relationships with emerging powers, including China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.” According to Clinton:

By virtue of our unique geography, the United States is both an Atlantic and Pacific power. We are proud of our European partnerships and all that they deliver. Our challenge now is to build a web of partnerships and institutions across the Pacific that is as durable and as consistent with American interests and values as the web we’ve built across the Atlantic. That is the touchstone of our efforts in all these areas.

Clinton explains the American treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand are crucial to building the new American security structure in the region and to enhancing American regional leadership. The Obama administration is committed to updating the alliances by making them more flexible and equipped with the defense capabilities and communications infrastructure needed to deter “provocations from the full spectrum of state and nonstate actors.” The Americans are also intent on building new
partnerships, with states such as China, India, Indonesia, Singapore, New Zealand, Malaysia and numerous other regional actors. Clinton writes “(w)e are asking these emerging partners to join us in shaping and participating in a rules-based regional and global order.”

Clinton specifically rejected the view that China’s rise is a threat to the United States or that the United States is trying to constrain Chinese economic growth. She emphasizes the mutual economic bond between China and the United States, but argues that both parties need to work together in order to foster effective cooperation and “meet our respective global responsibilities and obligations.” She holds out the Strategic Economic Dialogue between the US and China as an example of the American interest in expanding areas of common interest in building mutual trust between China and the US. It talks about the need to build military transparency and the need for the two countries to manage effectively their economic relationship and associated disagreements. Clinton expresses the concern over human rights in China.

Clinton emphasized the growing and important partnerships between the United States India and Indonesia, and the American commitment to multilateral cooperation. She emphasized the need for multilateral institutions that can organize effective collective action. She argued that “a more robust and coherent regional architecture in Asia would reinforce the system of rules and responsibilities, from protecting intellectual property to ensuring freedom of navigation, therefore the basis of an effective international order. In multilateral settings, responsible behavior is rewarded with legitimacy and respect, and we can work together to hold accountable those who undermine peace, stability, and prosperity.” In 2011, in the run-up to its inaugural participation in the EAS, the US opened the US Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta and signed the
The US remained intent on strengthening APEC as an instrument of economic integration across the region and using economic statecraft as a “pillar of American foreign policy.”

In 2009, the Americans effectively co-opted the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an initiative to bring together countries from around the Pacific in a single trading community. In 2011-2012, negotiations and diplomatic activity around the TPP accelerated considerably as part of the American pivot towards Asia. NOTE- CHECK ON THIS –TPP STARTS WITH SINGAPORE, MEXICO, CHILE, NEW ZEALAND, BRUNEI. US JOINS LATER. CO-OPTS.

Clinton emphasized the American commitment to human rights and democracy:

…even more than our military might or the size of our economy, our most potent as that hesitation is the power of our values-in particular, our steadfast support for democracy and human rights. This speaks to our deepest national character and is at the heart of our foreign policy, including our strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific region.

Clinton concluded her discussion by saying that the United States is active all over the world and that “each of these regions demands American engagement and leadership.” She went on to address those who are skeptical of American staying power by pointing out that the United States has continually bounced back from setbacks to:

“overcome them through reinvention and innovation. Our capacity to come back stronger is unmatched in modern history. It flows from our model of free democracy and free enterprise, a model that remains the most powerful source of prosperity and progress to humankind…the world still looks to the United States for leadership. Our military is by far the strongest, and our economy is by far the largest in the world. Our workers are the most productive. Our universities are renowned the world over. There should be no doubt that America has the capacity to secure and sustain our global leadership in this century as we did in the last.”

The Clinton statement indicates the Americans’ desire to shape the Asia-Pacific, using multilateral institutions and bilateral alliances, into a region that reflects American interests and benefits the United States economically and politically. There are many reasons to be skeptical
of this vision, however, not least because it is so completely self-serving. While the United States may be at peace with the idea of shaping the entire world into a form that works to the American advantage, other states may not share this vision. Nonetheless, events in the Asia-Pacific, combined with the unique American position in the region, have created new opportunities for American leadership. However, the most dramatic problems faced by the United States today are not emanate from outside its borders but rather from political, social and ideological paralysis within.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, 2012, American Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced that the United States would begin a gradual shift of naval resources from the Atlantic to the Pacific until, by ???, 50% of the American Navy was based in the Pacific. MORE DETAIL HERE ABOUT MILITARY –IMPACT OF MILITARY CUTBACKS.

CONDENSE WHAT CLINTON HAS SAID INTO MORE CONCISE SUMMATION.

Discussion and Analysis

The US damaged its standing in Asia with its response to the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997. The succeeding Bush Administration strengthened American military ties with Southeast Asia, but generally ignored regional multilateralism. The US’ inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated the very real limits of American military power. The US military could not defeat strongly-motivated insurgencies, a lesson taught to the Americans thirty years before in Vietnam. The Obama Administration’s efforts to reestablish American dominance in Asia benefited enormously from China’s political missteps in the region since 2010, but the US’s ambitions are handicapped by the complexity of regional relations. The US wishes to use regional multilateral institutions and its established alliances to strengthen the American grip on
regional and, by extension, global power. However, regional states are well aware of their own interests in avoiding strong alignments with the US against China. Beyond this, Asians continue to favor multilateral structures that are flexible and relatively informal, even if ASEAN has made recent efforts to create a more institutionally-binding structure. The US ambition is to use regional institutions to further its own designs.

Ultimately, however, the US’ greatest difficulties lie at home. The US remains the most economically and militarily powerful country in the world. Its ability to maintain this status is contingent on it following socially, economically and politically sound domestic policies. However, the US political system has given rise to right-wing political radicalism that is dedicated to the pursuit of domestic and international policies that will, inevitably, weaken the US at home and abroad. This radicalism has found a home in the Republican Party and is rooted in racial, economic and sociological ideologies and tensions that are deeply ingrained in the American character. These will not be easily resolved and will, over the long-term, seriously affect the US’ hard and soft power in the Asian region and the larger global community.

At this point in time, these ideological and sociological tensions have rendered the US all but ungovernable. President Obama has been saddled with a Republican-controlled Congress that is willing to obstruct initiatives that might benefit the American people in order to do Obama political damage. When Obama was elected to office, leaders of the Republican Party swore that they would do everything in their power to ensure that Obama was a one-term president. They embarked on a program of political sabotage, even going so far as to undermine their own country’s economy in the hope that the resulting political unhappiness would lead to Obama’s political downfall. The nadir of this strategy was when the Republican Party held the US national
debt hostage, precipitating a downgrade in the country’s credit rating. GET THE RATING AGENCY THAT DID THIS.

The US Supreme Court has become deeply politicized and is a full participant in the cultural and political battles being waged in the US. US Supreme Court decisions have opened the door on the outright corruption of American politics by moneyed interests. The US was already contending with the fact that its political campaign finance laws meant that its government was virtually for sale to the highest bidders. Now, the influence of money on American politics has become absolutely blatant and can only encourage public cynicism toward the political process. The quality and nature of American democracy is in serious jeopardy. These developments undermine American soft power and the value of the US as a desirable example for emerging democracies in the developing world. Already, these shifts are manifest as new and developing states turn elsewhere for inspiration and examples for their development paths. More importantly, these policies prevent the US federal government from implementing the kind of infrastructural, educational and social policies necessary to sustain a healthy American society into the future. American highways and cities are falling apart, but governments will not raise the taxes necessary to repair them. The American educational system is producing sub-par students, even as its universities are becoming too expensive for most young people to afford. American healthcare has improved thanks to “Obamacare” but it remains an inefficient and wasteful system. Nonetheless, it should give rise to a healthier population. The government’s inability to redistribute the benefits of economic largesse means that more and more of the middle class, who are absolutely essential to American social and economic health, are falling behind. Obama has rightly identified income inequality as the major political and social issue of the day, but he lacks the political support necessary to do anything about it. More
and more wealthy Americans are inheriting their wealth, creating an American aristocracy that has not earned the excesses it enjoys. In the end, what may end American power in the Asia Pacific is not just competition with China or unsupportable wars. It may simply be the rot at home. The durability of American economic and military power is dependent upon the health of the American political system. At this point in time, that system appears to be in a home-grown crisis driven by ideas that reflect a subset of fundamental – but ultimately self-destructive – American values.

The argument between the United States and some Southeast Asian countries over “Asian values” in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War was an early sign that the US intended to use its unchallenged dominance in the international system to push for significant changes even among its allies. American actions in the 1990s were an effort by the US to pursue policies that would lock in its dominant position in the international system. Under the Clinton administration, the American military significantly expanded its presence around the world. However, American power was felt most strongly in the economic realm as Clinton pushed for other countries to adopt policies that would further US economic interests and –supposedly – promote the US economic model. (In fact, as Joseph Stiglitz has pointed out, many of the policies the United States was pushing on the rest of the world were policies it would not adopt at home. REFERENCE)

For Asia, the first big break with the United States began with the Clinton Administration in 1997 and the Asian economic crisis. This break has not been fully repaired, as Asian efforts to insulate the region from the vagaries of the world economy makes clear. The Bush Administration solidified military and political ties with states of Southeast Asia. However, it did this for its own political reasons, in particular as part of its “War on Terror.” The chief quality of
the Bush years is that Asia suffered from significant American neglect. The US ignored Asian multilateral institutions, except when it attempted to use them to prosecute its singleminded conflict with “Islamic terrorism.” As a result, Asian institutions were distracted from dealing with issues that really mattered to Asians. During its second term, the Bush Administration attempted to repair some of the damage it had done to American standing in the world during its first term. But these efforts were largely too little and too late. American disengagement and uninterest meant that Asians developed their own institutions without significant American involvement or interference. Southeast Asian countries were intent on keeping the US engaged in the region as a hedge against growing Chinese influence, but this was more as a precaution than driven by any regional sense of urgency. As the Americans disengaged from Asia, China worked hard to build regional institutional structures to demonstrate that it could be a good regional citizen.

The Obama Administration put great effort into demonstrating the importance of Asia to the United States. The Administration recognized that the 21st century will be shaped in the Asia-Pacific region. However, like every American administration before it, the Obama presidency was determined to ensure continued American domination of the international system. It asserted American economic, political and military interests in being the apex power in the Asia-Pacific, as well as everywhere else on the globe. However, the reality remains that the United States is a power in relative decline. The Obama Administration seems to recognize this fact and is working to manage that reduction in capability while maintaining the US as the dominant regional power.

Southeast Asia values American hard power; it is not particularly interested in American “soft power.” Most of the regional states encourage the US presence because the US fills a security vacuum that they would need to fill for themselves if it were not present. The United
States performs a necessary and essential stabilizing role in the region. It is an outside power that does not have active territorial ambitions in the region. Most Asian states take a very pragmatic approach to their relations with the US. They pursue good relations because they understand that the US is the world’s dominant economic and military power. Their prosperity and security is still dependent on strong relations with the US. But as the US becomes less of an economic factor in the region and as China’s military power expands to undermine the credibility of the American deterrent – Asian states will reassess and recalibrate the nature of their relations with the American superpower. NOTE HAMILTON HART.

The American return to Asia in 2010-2012 was greatly facilitated by China’s many missteps in regional diplomacy during the same period (see Chapter Six). The Americans’ demonstrated willingness to work with multilateral institutions has done much to restore American prestige in the region. However, a number of caveats need to be borne in mind. First, the competition between China and the United States is beginning to play out in very stark ways within multilateral structures. A competition for influence between the two big powers can easily undermine those structures and render them powerless and unproductive. Asian multilateralism has the potential to be hijacked by the great powers. This danger is particularly relevant as the United States usually supports multilateral structures when they further American interests and ignores them when they do not.

Second, and related to the first point, is that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made it clear that the United States believes its role in the Asia-Pacific must be that of regional leader. This raises a key question: can the United States work in concert with other countries in a collaborative and consultative manner? Though the US will be remain the wealthiest country the world for some time to come, other rising powers are now making their influence felt in the
international arena The US can no longer dominate the world the way that it did. But this is a reality that is very difficult for American political leaders to accept. The nationalist myths and sentiments around the idea of “American exceptionalism” remain strong in the United States, and have even been strengthened as the US begins to grapple with its decline. This need to lead may greatly complicate how the Americans function within regional institutions. Do Americans have the capacity to compromise their own goals in order to reach multilateral consensus? Can they follow the lead of other states and simply be one state among others sharing common goals? This is something that smaller, weaker states have always had to do when dealing with multilateral diplomacy. But the United States, as the dominant world power, has never approached multilateral diplomacy in this way. Does it have the expertise and even the political culture necessary to make the compromises of its own interest that will be necessary in a world where American power is no longer unparalleled or so overwhelming that it cannot be defied?

In addition, the US approach to Asian multilateralism is to demand, albeit in a more subtle way, that it conforms to American expectations. This approach will either serve to undermine Asia’s indigenous institutions or make it more difficult for the US to operate in the region.

Clinton’s explanation of how the US intended to engage the Asia Pacific bears further analysis. She laid out a vision where the US strengthens its existing military alliances, brings other countries into new alliances, and ties the region together through economic connections. She saw the US engaging existing multilateral institutions, but also called for those structures to become more goal-oriented, effective and binding. This evokes past tensions between Asian states and Western countries over the form and approach that institutions must take. The Americans will continue to challenge Asians’ enduring commitment to institutions that are non-
binding and flexible. Asian states are committed to these institutional arrangements because they seek to preserve their sovereignty; it is unlikely the Americans will be able to force further reform. This suggests that Asian multilateral structures are in for a difficult time. If these structures become caught in tensions between Western and Asian states, they can become irrelevant. At the same time, the Americans are intent on building up their bilateral security and economic ties. Thus, from an American perspective, the future of the Asian region remains nested in a revised and expanded version of the San Francisco System. Divisions within and between Asian states make this a plausible outcome. If Asian states were able to resolve their own outstanding territorial and political tensions, the US would be much more constrained in how far it could extend its regional influence. By remaining divided, Asia Pacific countries have provided the US with easy access to the region and a viable claim on regional leadership. This is not to suggest that the US is actually pursuing policies of “divide and conquer”; rather, it is taking full advantage of the existing intra-regional tensions to further its position.

Nonetheless, the US does face some considerable obstacles in its efforts to reassert regional leadership. As noted, the states of Southeast Asia are interested in American hard power, i.e., its military power. The US serves a crucial security role in the region and most Asian states want it to continue in that role. Asian states are much less interested in American “soft power,” particularly in certain areas. Clinton has made it clear that the US intends to continue promoting democracy and human rights across the region. Since the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the US credibility on these issues has plummeted. The Bush Administration adopted torture as state policy (dozens of prisoners in Afghanistan and Iraq were tortured to death) and implicated many other Western countries in various human rights abuses designed to prosecute the US “war on terror.” Under Obama, the most egregious examples of human rights abuse have stopped, but
Guantanamo Bay remains open, Americans are under surveillance as never before, fundamental legal rights necessary to democracies have been suspended or are under threat, and hundreds of innocent people in the developing world have been killed in an expanding “drone war.” Just as telling, even as the US demands accountability for human rights abuses from its political enemies and rivals, no major political figures in the US have been held accountable for any of these actions. As such, the US appeal to human rights and democracy appears to be politically expedient. It will be relatively easy for Southeast Asian states to push back against any American demands in these areas, if they choose to do so.

The more substantial blow to American soft power, however, is in the economic realm. America’s soft power also takes the form of economic ideology and this erosion began under the Clinton Administration. The appeal of the American system after the end of the Cold War was based on the belief that the United States had demonstrated the superiority of its political and economic systems to those of the Soviet Union. Since that time, however, the American economic and political systems have come under significant stress. The failures and excesses of American economic ideology are considered by many Asians to be at the root of the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1999. At that time, many Asians argued that the main problem faced by the region was the instability inherent in a global financial system based around the free flow of capital. Such capital, they argued, was subject to investor panic and irrationality. In 2008, the world was rocked by an international financial crisis that began in the United States and spread through the global financial system like wildfire. The crisis was the result of seriously deficient American regulation of the US financial sector. The lack of international regulation of capital meant that the crisis contaminated the entire global financial system. Even more, various private and governmental watchdogs were found to be deficient or complicit in the corruption of the
system. For decades, the US had promoted the virtues of neoliberal economic policies, which focused on reducing regulation and other “barriers” to the free flow of economic forces. The events of 2008 were the direct result of this philosophy.

The extraordinary economic crisis that began with the near-collapse of the American financial system in 2008 and its associated ripple effects across the world severely compromised the appeal and the ideological foundation of the American economic approach. The continuing failure of the United States to put its economic house in order further undermines its appeal as an economic example to the rest of the world. The problem is compounded by the US’s inability to accept and deal with the obvious limitations of its own system. Indeed, while neoliberalism led the world to the brink of economic collapse, the continuing power of neoliberal ideas has led to further economic crisis in countries such as Britain and has contributed to paralysis in the European Union economic zone. The failure of the US’ political and economic ideas is a larger failure of the Western world itself. (Quiggin, 2010; Krugman; Stiglitz)

In the US, the problem is more than just economic. The US political system is deeply corrupted by the influence of moneyed elites and individuals. This has created a system wherein the wealthy can buy the political outcomes that they want or seriously obstruct the outcomes they do not like. The nature of American political campaigns requires that elected representatives always have access to financial resources. This fact, combined with US Supreme Court decisions protecting the freedom of speech of corporations, has meant that the quality of American democracy itself is at issue. Indeed, it is fair to say that the US may no longer be a fully functional democracy. The reality of the influence of money in US politics means that it is highly unlikely that the US government can implement the kind of regulation of Wall Street and the financial industry that global stability and commonsense require. This means that the US may
already be a strong obstacle to effective international governance. If so, other regions of the world may be compelled to construct structures that protect them from the excesses of American economic ideology. As we have seen, this is already playing out, to a limited degree, in the CMIM. At the national level, Asian states are also trying to safeguard themselves from a volatile world economy.

Beyond the damage to American “soft power” has been the damage done to American “hard power” by the Bush Administration. When the US began its wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, it was flush with the arrogance of power. The neoconservatives shaping American foreign policy made it clear that the US was no longer going to restrain itself. It was the premiere power in the world and it would not brook opposition or even dissent. It fully intended to use its massive military power to full advantage, reshaping the Middle East to make the region more accommodating of US interests. Allies were required only to fall into line. If they did not, they would be punished, ignored or, if they were sufficiently obsequious, forgiven. GET RICE QUOTE. The US made it clear that multilateral organizations and international law would not be allowed to pose obstacles to the exercise of US power. The US soon discovered that invading a country was much easier than holding it captive; it also learned that it needed the support of the same allies it had derided, allies who were often not willing to come to its aid.

The failure of American military power in Iraq and Afghanistan is a mixed blessing. These failures probably prevented the US from launching other, even more destructive wars and doing permanent damage to the fabric of the international society.(Dyer, Cheney) However, it has set unfortunate and destructive precedents for the use of force. It has also undermined the mystique of the American military. Having a powerful and feared military force is an advantage; using that force and finding that it is not as omnipotent as you had assumed graphically
illustrates the limits of power. The lessons of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are that powerful, modern military machines are a very blunt instrument of limited utility in fighting insurgent wars. A relatively small insurgency like the one in Iraq, was enough to put the American military machine on the ropes. Contrary to popular myth, the US managed to pull out of Iraq not because of the success of its military “surge” but because it learned to buy off the insurgents who were attacking US soldiers. This delaying tactic bought the US the time to get out of the country, even as it laid the groundwork for the sectarian warfare that followed. In Afghanistan, the US ran up against a determined enemy in the Taliban that is willing to keep fighting for as long as it takes to drive out the foreign invaders.

The fact that the US military could not handle two insurgencies should come as little surprise. The US learned the same lesson and faced the same fate in Vietnam 40 years ago. But insurgent warfare is quite different from conventional warfare. Does the US inability to deal with insurgency affect the credibility of the US military commitments in Asia? Probably not. First, it is unthinkable that the US would get deeply involved in another insurgent war in Southeast Asia. The Vietnam Syndrome is at least that effective. Second, the US military machine remains unmatched in its technical ability. In a match of military hardware against military hardware, the US will usually win. Since most of its activities in the Asia Pacific region are likely to involve using ships and planes against other ships and planes, US effectiveness should remain intact.

However, the overall value of the American military presence in the Asia Pacific and its changing nature must be taken into account. During the Cold War, the purpose of the US military presence was obvious –i.e, to serve as a deterrent and a potential tripwire against aggressive regional states associated with the Communist bloc. With the end of the Cold War, the US is still necessary to provide security against North Korea. But does it have a legitimate military role to
play in the rest of the region? The affirmative argument that has the most weight is the idea that Asian states prefer that the US be present. So long as the Americans are guarding regional waterways and providing regional security, then regional states do not need to fulfill this function. Thus, animosities and territorial disputes between regional states are less likely to get out of hand. Japan, in particular, is kept in check by the US presence. Even though the US has insisted, in recent years, that Japan carry more of the regional security burden, the perception that Japan remains under effective US control mitigates the concerns associated with Japan’s military power. Yet, do these considerations justify the continued US military presence? If regional states became involved in local conflicts, what would the US do? Its most useful roles would be to use its diplomatic connections to bring together disputant states. The fact that many local states share a mutual ally in the US can be very useful for creating the possibility of political resolutions to various disputes. In an extreme case, it might be possible for US naval vessels to place themselves between the forces of disputant states.

There is no escaping the reality that the US’ continued presence in the Asia Pacific has become directly tied to the rise of China. The US is in a potentially direct conflict with China if the situation in Taiwan ever spins out of control. Just as important, if China decides to use force against other regional states, the US is present as another potential tripwire. However, in considering how this kind of scenario might play out, the US presence becomes far more questionable. Would the US really put itself in the position of a potential military conflict with China over the South China Sea or the Senkaku Islands? Should it do so? The US and China are both nuclear powers with the capacity to attack and devastate the other’s homeland. Avoiding a potential nuclear confrontation means avoiding direct conflict between the two powers. From this perspective, the utility of the US presence in the region is suspect. The possibility of nuclear
war trumps all other considerations. It is conceivable that the US could provide weaponry to its allies if they were involved in a military confrontation with China, but this strategy would still risk the possibility of unwanted escalation. In short, the US is already involved in a potentially very volatile situation with China over its commitments to Taiwan. Why would it place itself into other volatile regional situations? For many years, the US explicitly refused to agree to the Philippines’ assertion that the US-Philippines Security Treaty required the US to come to the defense of its ally in the case of any altercation in the South China Sea. This apparently changed in 2010, when the US inserted itself into the conflict, to the shock and dismay of China. But the principle of minimizing possible areas of friction is sound.

Conclusion:

In the face an assertive and aggressive China, the states of the Asia Pacific want the US to remain active and engaged (politically, economically and militarily) in the region. The US is still seen as the most capable and acceptable counter to Chinese power. However, there are real reasons to be concerned about American reliability. The Asian economic crisis of 1997-1999 revealed the US as an unreliable and predatory power. The years of the Bush Administration revealed a US that was largely uninterested in Asia, except where Asia served American purposes. The ongoing world financial crisis revealed that many of the American ideas that underpinned the world economy are fundamentally flawed. At an even more basic level, basic qualities and ideologies that are essential parts of the American cultural character are now being expressed in ways that undermine American social and political stability. Racial, cultural, social and economic attitudes – many of them the legacy of American history – are being expressed in the American political system. The cultural and political conflicts that have resulted have rendered the US all but ungovernable. More relevant to the concerns of this paper, they are
preventing the US from implementing the kind of social, economic, infrastructural and redistributive programs that are absolutely essential to maintaining a healthy and functioning advanced economy and society. This has serious implications for American economic and military capability in the future. The US may prove to be an unreliable ally to Asian states in a variety of ways.

1 Some readers might object that the United States was ultimately successful in its occupation of Iraq. However, I believe this is a misreading of the situation. The limited success that the United States enjoyed in alleviating the violence in Iraq was due to the US’s willingness to bribe, thereby co-opting, its enemies. There was no military solution to the problem, myths about the “surge” aside. How durable this economic solution can be remains open to debate. As of this writing, Iraq remains a state that is in a constant state of low-level political/sectarian violence. In 2014, fundamentalist Sunni Muslim insurgents fighting in the Syrian civil war spilled over the border into Iraq and were soon conquering large swaths of Iraqi territory, largely because local Iraqi Sunni Muslims were willing to support the insurgents over the Shi’ite-dominated Iraqi government. That government had been systematically oppressing Iraqi Sunnis.