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Book Guide

Lost Decade: The U.S. Pivot to Asia and the Rise of Chinese Power

Lost Decade is an essential guide for understanding the historic shift to Asia-centric geopolitics and its implications for the United States' present and future, offering a comprehensive analysis of how the U.S. pivot to Asia was intended to counterbalance China's growing influence. The book delves into the strategic missteps and successes of this policy, providing valuable insights into the geopolitical landscape and the necessary adjustments for future U.S. foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

Summary

Across the political spectrum, there is wide agreement that Asia should stand at the center of U.S. foreign policy. But this worldview, first represented in the Barack Obama administration's 2011 "Pivot to Asia," marks a dramatic departure from the entire history of American grand strategy. More than a decade on, we now have the perspective to evaluate it in depth. In *Lost Decade*, Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine—two eminent figures in American foreign policy—take this long view. They conclude that while the Pivot's strategic logic is strong, there are few successes to speak of, and that we need a far more coherent approach to the Indo-Pacific region. They examine the Pivot through various lenses: situating it historically in the context of U.S. global foreign policy, revealing the inside story of how it came about, assessing the effort thus far, identifying the ramifications in other regions (namely Europe and the Middle East), and proposing a path forward.

The authors stress that the United States has far less margin for foreign policy error today than a decade ago. As the international order becomes more unstable, Blackwill and Fontaine argue that it is imperative that policymakers fully understand what the Pivot to Asia aimed to achieve—and where it fell short—in order to muster the resources, alliances, and resolve to preserve an open order in Asia and the world. Crafting an effective policy for the region, they contend, is crucial for preserving American security, prosperity, and democratic values.

This book is suitable for the following types of undergraduate and graduate courses:

- International Security
- International Relations
- Strategic Studies
- U.S. Foreign Policy

Main Takeaways

- More than a decade after the Pivot to Asia was announced by the Obama administration, Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine conclude that while the Pivot to Asia's strategic logic is strong, Washington's failure to respond to China's rise represents one of the three greatest mistakes in US foreign policy since WWII, along with the 1965 escalation in Vietnam and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

- Throughout the text, Blackwill and Fontaine examine the Pivot through various lenses. The authors situate it historically in the context of US global foreign policy, reveal the inside story of how it came about, and assess the effort thus far. They clearly identify the ramifications of the Pivot’s announcement and failed implementation across Europe, the Middle East, and Indo-Pacific; and also document China’s rise over the 2010s with no U.S. response. Finally, the authors propose a path forward with a “To-Do” list which includes nine policy recommendations.
- As the international order becomes more unstable, Blackwill and Fontaine argue that it is imperative that policymakers fully understand what the Pivot to Asia aimed to achieve—and where it fell short—in order to muster the resources, alliances, and resolve to preserve an open order in Asia and the world.

Discussion Questions

International Security and International Relations:

- What is the motivation behind the U.S. plan for a Pivot to Asia?
- Why is East Asia seen by U.S. policymakers as more pressing than Europe or the Middle East?
- What American vital interests are at stake in Asia? What are the implications if the United States chooses not to follow through with the Pivot to Asia?
- Is China primarily a security threat or an economic threat to the United States?
- What is the role of states such as India, Japan or Russia in U.S.-China competition?
- Does the plan for a U.S. Pivot to Asia align with the “balance of power” hypothesis? If so, what explains the failure to pivot?
- Is U.S.-China competition a “Cold War II”? What are the major differences between the Cold War and U.S.-China competition?

Strategic Studies:

- Why have key U.S. allies in Asia failed to provide for their own security? How can the United States encourage allies to take on more responsibility?
- Why was the United States unable to balance against a rapidly rising China?
- What should be the long-term goal of U.S. competition with China? What about the short-term goal?
- How does Chinese history shape China’s strategic approach to the U.S.?
- What are the main policy tradeoffs to a “Pivot to Asia”? What are the risks in Europe and the Middle East from the Pivot?
- How would you rank the relative importance of Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and the Indo-Pacific to U.S. national interests?

U.S. Foreign Policy:

- Why has the United States been unable to balance against a rapidly rising China despite the last three presidents recognizing China as an urgent priority?
- What U.S. domestic pressures have hindered the Pivot to Asia?
- How would you rank the relative importance of Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and the Indo-Pacific to U.S. national interests?
- Is U.S.-China competition a “Cold War II”? What are the major differences between the Cold War and U.S.-China competition?
- What should be the long-term goals of U.S. competition with China? What about the short-term goals?

Essay Questions

- Is it inevitable that the United States will Pivot to Asia? And if so, what best explains the inability of the United States to effectively prepare for competition with China over the past decade?
- What are the stakes for India, Japan and Russia in U.S.-China competition? What is their ideal outcome?
- Would an effective U.S. Pivot to Asia stabilize or destabilize the Indo-Pacific?
- How has China taken advantage of the U.S. failure to Pivot to Asia? Is the United States threatened by China's policy in the developing world?

Further Projects

- Ask students to compete in a mock debate between the United States and U.S. allies (Europe, Japan, and Australia) on whether those allies need to increase their defense spending in order to counter China. Try to convince the other side by appealing to their vital national interests.
- Ask students to create a list of at most five vital national interests to the United States. Students should then answer which of these interests are threatened by each of China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. Then ask students how (if at all) the results of this exercise have changed their assessment of the importance of a pivot to Asia.

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