CHAPTER 3

USA

'Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.'
Attributed to Mark Twain

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. IF YOU WON THE lottery and were looking to buy a country to live in, the United States of America is the first one the estate agent would show you.

Twain was referring to the erroneous reporting of his death, but he could have been talking about the over-reporting of the demise of the USA.

It's in a wonderful neighbourhood, the views are marvellous and there are some terrific water features, the transport links are excellent; and the neighbours? The neighbours are great, no trouble at all.

If you broke this living space up into numerous sections it would considerably lower its value – especially if the tenants did not all speak the same language and paid the rent in different currencies – but as one home, for one family, it can't be bettered.

There are fifty American states, but they add up to one nation in a way the twenty-seven sovereign states of the European Union never can. Most of the EU countries have a national identity far stronger, more defined, than any American state. It is easy to find a French person who is French first, European second, or one who pays little allegiance to the idea of Europe, but an American identifies with his or her Union in a way few Europeans do theirs. This is explained by geography, and by the history of the unification of the USA.

Painting this vast country in bold, broad brushstrokes from east to west, you can divide it into three parts.

First there is the East Coast Plain leading to the Appalachian Mountains, an area well watered by short but navigable rivers and with fertile soil. Then, heading further west, you have the Great Plains stretching all the way to the Rocky Mountains, and within this section lies the Mississippi Basin with its network of huge, navigable rivers flowing into the Mississippi River all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico, which is sheltered by the peninsula of Florida and several islands. Once over the massive mountain range that is the Rockies you get to the desert, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, a narrow coastal plain, and finally to the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

To the north, above the Great Lakes, lies the Canadian Shield, the world's largest area of Precambrian rock, much of which forms a barrier to human settlement. To the south-west – desert. Geography had determined that if a political entity could get to and then control the land 'from sea to shining sea' it would be a great power, the greatest history has known. Once that power was achieved, the Union would become almost impossible to invade. As we saw with Russia, there is 'strategic depth' for a defending force to fall back to. The size of Canada (and to a lesser extent Mexico) is also an asset, as any hostile power attempting to invade by going through these countries would have incredibly long supply lines.

Equally important, in modern times, is that anyone stupid enough to contemplate invading America would soon be forced to reflect on the fact that it contains hundreds of millions of guns, readily available to a population that takes its life, liberty and pursuit of happiness very seriously. In addition to the formidable US Armed Forces there are the National Guard, state police and an urban police force that can quickly resemble a military unit. In the event of an invasion, every US Dallas, Denver and Detroit would quickly resemble a Ukrainian Donbas.

But to achieve this rare geographical position of near invulnerability from conventional attack, first the space had to be acquired and unified, which, considering the continent is 3,000 miles from coast to coast, was achieved astonishingly quickly.

When the Europeans first began to land and stay in the early seventeenth century, they quickly realised that the east coast of this 'virgin' territory was packed with natural harbours

and fertile soil. Here was a place where they could live and, unlike their home countries, where they hoped they could live freely. Their descendants would go on to deny the native inhabitants their freedom, but that was not the intention of the first settlers. Geography pulled them across the Atlantic in ever greater numbers.

The last of the original thirteen colonies to be established was Georgia in 1732. The thirteen became increasingly independently minded all the way up to the American Revolutionary War (1775–83). At the beginning of this period the colonies, which gradually began to connect to each other, stretched 1,000 miles from Massachusetts in the north down to Georgia, and had an estimated combined population of about 2.5 million people. They were bounded by the Atlantic to their east and the Appalachian Mountains to their west. The Appalachians, over 1,500 miles long, are impressive, but compared to the Rockies not particularly high. Nevertheless, they still proved a formidable barrier to westward movement for the early settlers, who were busy consolidating what territory they had subdued and preparing to govern it themselves. The colonists had another obstacle, this one political. The British government forbade settlement west of the Appalachians as it wanted to ensure that trade, and taxes, remained on the eastern seaboard.

The Declaration of Independence (1776) states: ‘When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume the Powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.’ It goes on to outline at some length those causes, and to say (with no hint of slave-owning irony) that it was self-evident that all men were created equal. These noble sentiments helped to fuel America’s victory in the War of Independence, which in turn gave birth to a new nation state.

In the early 1800s this young country’s leadership still had little idea that it was thousands of miles from the ‘South Sea’, or Pacific. Using Indian trails, a few explorers, for whom the word ‘intrepid’ could have been coined, pushed through the Appalachians and reached the Mississippi. There they thought they might find a waterway leading to the ocean, thus joining up with the vast tracts of land the Spanish had explored across the south-western and Pacific coastal regions, including what are now Texas and California.

At this point the fledgling USA was far from secure, and if it had been restricted to its then boundaries it would have struggled to become a great power. Its citizens already had access to the Ohio River, just west of the Appalachians, but that led to the Mississippi, whose western bank was controlled by the French all the way down to the city of New Orleans. Thus the French had command of American trade heading out to the Old World from the Gulf of Mexico, as well as the vast territory to the west in what is now the American heartland. In 1802, a year after Thomas Jefferson assumed the presidency, he wrote: ‘There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans.’

So France was the possessor and the problem; but the solution, unusually, was not warfare.

In 1803 the United States simply bought control of the entire Louisiana Territory from France. The land stretched from the Gulf of Mexico north-west up to the headwaters of the tributaries of the Mississippi in the Rocky Mountains. It was an area equivalent in size to modern-day Spain, Italy, France, the UK and Germany combined. With it came the Mississippi Basin, from which flowed America’s route to greatness.

At the stroke of a pen, and the handing over of $15 million, the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 doubled the size of the USA and gave it mastery over the greatest inland water transport route in the world. As the American historian Henry Adams wrote, 'Never did the United States get so much for so little.'

The greater Mississippi Basin has more miles of navigable inland waterways than the rest of the world put together. Nowhere else are there so many rivers whose source is not in high land, and whose waters run smoothly all the way to the ocean across vast distances. The Mississippi, fed by much of the basin river system, begins near Minneapolis in Minnesota and ends over 1,000 miles away in the Gulf of Mexico. So the rivers were the natural conduit for ever-increasing trade, leading to a great port and all using waterborne craft, which was, and is, many times cheaper than road travel.

The Americans now had strategic geographical depth, a massive fertile land and an alternative to the Atlantic ports with which to conduct business. They also had ever-expanding routes east to west linking the East Coast to the new territory, and then the river systems flowing north to south to connect the then sparsely populated lands with each other, thus encouraging America to form as a single entity.

There was now a sense that the nation would become a colossus, a continental power. They pushed onwards, ever westwards, but with an eye on the south and the security of the jewel in the crown – the Mississippi.

By 1814 the British had gone, and the French had given up on Louisiana. The trick now was to get the Spanish to go. It wasn't too difficult. They were exhausted by the war in Europe against Napoleon; the Americans were pushing the Seminole Indian nation into Spanish Florida, and Madrid knew that waves of settlers would be following. In 1819 Spain ceded Florida to the USA, and with it a massive amount of territory.

The Louisiana Purchase had given the USA the heartland, but the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819 gave them something almost as valuable. The Spanish accepted that the USA would have jurisdiction in the far west above the 42nd parallel, on what is now the border of California and Oregon, while Spain would control what lay below, west of the American territories. The USA had reached the Pacific.

At the time most Americans thought the great victory of 1819 was getting Florida, but Secretary of State John Quincy Adams wrote in his diary: 'The acquisition of a definite line of boundary to the [Pacific] forms a great epoch in our history.'

But there was another Spanish-speaking problem – Mexico.

Because the Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the USA, when Mexico became independent of Spain in 1821 its border was just 200 miles from the port of New Orleans. In the twenty-first century Mexico poses no territorial threat to the USA, although its proximity causes America problems, as it feeds its northern neighbour's appetite for illegal labour and drugs.

In 1821 that was different. Mexico controlled land all the way up to northern California, which the USA could live with, but it also stretched out east, including what is now Texas, which then, as now, borders Louisiana. Mexico's population at the time was 6.2 million, the USA's 9.6 million. The US Army may have been able to see off the mighty British, but they had been fighting 3,000 miles from home with supply lines across an ocean. The Mexicans were next door.

Quietly, Washington encouraged Americans and new arrivals to begin to settle on both sides of the US–Mexican border. Waves of immigrants came and spread west and south-west. There was little chance of them putting down roots in the region we now know as modern

Mexico, thus assimilating, and boosting the population numbers there. Mexico is not blessed in the American way. It has poor-quality agricultural land, no river system to use for transport and was wholly undemocratic, with new arrivals having scant hope of ever being granted land.

While the infiltration of Texas was going on, Washington issued the 'Monroe Doctrine' (named after President James Monroe) in 1823. This boiled down to warning the European powers that they could no longer seek land in the Western Hemisphere, and that if they lost any parts of their existing territory they could not reclaim them. Or else.

By the mid-1830s there were enough white settlers in Texas to force the Mexican issue. The Mexican, Catholic, Spanish-speaking population numbered in the low thousands, as against about 20,000 white Protestant settlers. The Texas Revolution of 1835–36 drove the Mexicans out, but it was a close-run thing, and had the settlers lost then the Mexican Army would have been in a position to march on New Orleans and control the southern end of the Mississippi. It is one of the great 'what ifs' of modern history.

However, history turned the other way and Texas became independent via American money, arms and ideas. The territory went on to join the Union in 1845 and together they fought the 1846–48 Mexican War. They crushed their southern neighbour and persuaded Mexico to accept that its sovereignty ended in the sands of the southern bank of the Rio Grande.

With California, New Mexico and land that is now Arizona, Nevada, Utah and part of Colorado included, the borders of continental USA then looked similar to those of today, and they are in many ways natural borders. In the south, the Rio Grande runs through desert; to the north are great lakes and rocky land with few people close to the border, especially in the eastern half of the continent; and to the east and west – the great oceans. However, in the twenty-first century, in the south-west the cultural historical memory of the region as Hispanic land is likely to resurface. The demographics are changing rapidly. New Mexico is now about 50 per cent Hispanic, and in 2022 the California census showed that Hispanics were the largest single population group there, as they were in Texas as per its 2023 census.

But back to 1848. The Europeans had gone, the Mississippi Basin was secure from land attack, the Pacific was reached and it was obvious that the remaining Indian nations would be subdued: there was no threat to the USA. It was time to make some money, and then venture out across the seas to secure the approaches to the three coastlines of the superpower-to-be.

The California Gold Rush of 1848–55 helped, but the immigrants were heading west anyway. After all, there was a continental empire to build, and as it developed more immigrants followed. The Homestead Act of 1862 awarded 160 acres of federally owned land to anyone who farmed it for five years and paid a small fee. If you were a poor man from Germany, Scandinavia or Italy, why go to Latin America and be a serf when you could go to the USA and be a free land-owning man?

In 1867 Alaska was bought from Russia. At the time it was known as 'Seward's folly' after the Secretary of State, William Seward, who agreed the deal. He paid $7.2 million, or two cents an acre. The press accused him of purchasing snow, but minds were changed with the discovery of major gold deposits in 1896. Decades later, huge reserves of oil were also found.

Two years on, in 1869, came the opening of the transcontinental railroad. Now you could cross the country in a week, whereas it had previously taken several hazardous months.

As the country grew, and grew wealthy, it began to develop a blue-water navy. For most of the nineteenth century foreign policy was dominated by expanding trade and avoiding entanglements outside the neighbourhood, but it was time to push out and protect the approaches to the coastlines. The only real threat was from Spain – it may have been

persuaded to leave the mainland, but it still controlled the islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico and part of what is now the Dominican Republic.

Cuba in particular kept American presidents awake at night, as it would again in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The island sits just off Florida, giving it access to and potential control of the Florida Straits and the Yucatan Channel in the Gulf of Mexico. This is the exit and entry route for the port of New Orleans.

Spain's power may have been diminishing towards the end of the nineteenth century, but it was still a formidable military force. In 1898 the USA declared war on Spain, routed its military and gained control of Cuba, with Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines thrown in for good measure. They would all come in useful, but Guam in particular is a vital strategic asset and Cuba a strategic threat if controlled by a major power.

In 1898 that threat was removed by war with Spain. In 1962 it was removed by the prospect of war with the Soviet Union after they blinked first. Today, because Russia can't afford it, no great power sponsors Cuba and since the death of its leader Fidel Castro in 2016, Cuban–American relations have slowly thawed and US restrictions on travel and business dealings have loosened.

America was moving quickly; 1898 was also the year it secured the Florida Straits and to a great extent the Caribbean, and it also annexed the Pacific island of Hawaii. The latter both protected the approaches to the West Coast of the USA and established an American presence far out into the ocean from which power could be projected deep into the Western Pacific. The USA was now 2,400 miles closer to Japan and China than it had been the year before.

In 1903 America signed a treaty leasing it exclusive rights to the Panama Canal. Trade was booming.

The time was right for the USA to show it had more than arrived on the world stage, and what better way to demonstrate that than a display of force circumnavigating the globe.

Washington's policy was underpinned by the theories of Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), a naval historian, military analyst and theorist. He placed enormous importance on chokepoints, access to coaling stations and canals, and argued that for a global power, having strength at sea was the key to survival and success. Mahan's thinking shaped modern US national security strategy and can still be seen in the twenty-first century, not least by the Chinese military, whose senior leadership read him as a matter of course.

His views chimed with, and partially influenced, those of President Theodore Roosevelt, who had come to office in 1901. Roosevelt coined the maxim 'Speak softly and carry a big stick', and later explained that the big stick should be 'a thoroughly efficient navy'.

In December 1907, Roosevelt was speaking relatively softly – but in essence he sailed a large stick around the world. Sixteen navy battleships from the Atlantic fleet set out from the USA. Their hulls were painted white, the navy's peacetime colour, and this impressive example of diplomatic signalling became known as the 'Great White Fleet'. Over the following fourteen months the fleet called in on twenty ports, including ones in Brazil, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Japan, China, Italy and Egypt. Of these the most important was Japan, which was put on notice that, *in extremis*, America's Atlantic fleet could be deployed to the Pacific. The voyage, a mixture of hard and soft power, preceded the military term 'force projection' but that is what it was, and it was duly noted by every major power in the world.

Most subsequent presidents bore in mind George Washington's advice in his farewell address in 1796 not to get involved in 'inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others', and to 'steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world'.

Apart from a late – albeit crucial – entry into the First World War, twentieth-century America did manage, mostly, to avoid entanglements and alliances until 1941. It entered the Second World War partially for reasons Alfred Mahan had worried about: a strong Germany could dominate Europe, which could be a threat to the USA.

The Second World War changed everything. The USA was attacked by an increasingly militaristic Japan after Washington imposed economic sanctions on Tokyo that would have brought the country to its knees. The Americans came out swinging. They projected their now vast power around the world, and in order to keep things that way they didn't go home.

As the world's greatest economic and military post-war power, America now needed to control the world's sea lanes, to keep the peace and get the goods to market.

They were the 'last man standing'. The Europeans had exhausted themselves, and their economies, like their towns and cities, were in ruins. The Japanese were crushed, the Chinese devastated and at war with each other, the Russians weren't even in the capitalist game.

A century earlier, the British had learned that they needed forward bases and coaling stations from which to project and protect their naval power. Now, with Britain in decline, the Americans looked lasciviously at the British assets and said, 'Nice bases – we'll have them.'

The price was right. In the autumn of 1940, the British desperately needed more warships. The Americans had fifty spare and so, with what was called the 'Destroyers for Bases Agreement', the British swapped their ability to be a global power for help with remaining in the war. Almost every British naval base in the Western Hemisphere was handed over on ninety-nine-year leases. This was, and is still, for all countries, about concrete. Concrete in the building of ports, runways, hardened aircraft hangars, fuel depots, dry docks and Special Forces training areas. In the Far East, after the defeat of Japan, America seized the opportunity to build these all over the Pacific. Guam, halfway across, they already had; by 1945 they had bases right up to the Japanese island of Okinawa in the East China Sea.

The Americans also looked to the land. If they were going to pay to reconstruct Europe through the Marshall Plan of 1948–51, they had to ensure that the Soviet Union wouldn't wreck the place and reach the Atlantic coast. The doughboys didn't go home. Instead they set up shop in Germany and faced down the Red Army across the North European Plain.

In 1949 Washington led the formation of NATO, and with it effectively assumed command of the Western world's surviving military might. The civilian head of NATO might well be a Belgian one year, a Brit the next, but the military commander is always an American, and by far the greatest firepower within NATO is American.

No matter what the treaty says, NATO's Supreme Commander ultimately answers to Washington. The UK and France would learn this to their cost during the Suez Crisis of 1956. Compelled by American pressure to cease their occupation of the canal zone, they lost most of their influence in the Middle East as a result and were taught that a NATO country does not hold a strategic naval policy without first asking Washington.

With Iceland, Norway, Britain and Italy (all founding members of NATO) having granted the USA access and rights to their bases, it now dominated the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean as well as the Pacific. In 1951 it extended its domination there down to the south by forming an alliance with Australia and New Zealand, and also to the north following the Korean War of 1950–53.

There were now two maps of the United States: the familiar one stretching diagonally down from Seattle on the Pacific coast to the Florida peninsula in the Sargasso Sea, and the one demonstrating America's geopolitical power footprint. The latter showed the bases, ports and runways – the real things you could mark on the page. But it was also a conceptual map, one that told you that in the event of situation 'A' happening in region 'B', country 'C' could be relied on to be a US ally and vice versa. If a major power wanted to play anywhere in the world, it knew that if the USA chose to, it could have a dog in the fight. A superpower had arrived. In the 1960s the USA's failure in Vietnam damaged its confidence and made it more cautious about foreign entanglements. However, what was effectively a defeat did not substantially alter America's global strategy.

There were now only three places from which a challenge to American hegemony could come: a united Europe, Russia and China. All would grow stronger, but two would reach their limits.

The dream of some Europeans of an EU with 'ever-closer union' and a common foreign and defence policy has stuttered over the past decade. It took the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine to galvanise Brussels, but the EU countries had spent so little on defence that, when tested, they were found to be reliant on the USA. The economic crash of 2008 left the European powers reduced in capacity and with little appetite for foreign adventures, especially after seeing how badly the intervention in Libya ended, when the French and British, with the Americans 'leading from behind', enabled the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime. In 2013 the then UK prime minister David Cameron visited Tripoli and told the Libyan people that the lesson learned in Afghanistan and Iraq was: 'helping other countries, intervening in other countries, is not simply about military intervention'. To cries of '*Allahu Akbar*', he pledged: 'In building a new Libya you will have no greater friend than the United Kingdom. We will stand with you every step of the way.' But then, as the country plunged into chaos, with numerous militias battling for control, the Europeans walked away, leaving a broken state, a desperate people and a new route for illegal immigration into the continent.

In 1991 the Russian threat had been seen off due to Russia's staggering economic incompetence, military overstretch and failure to persuade the subjected masses in its empire that gulags and the overproduction of state-funded tractors was the way ahead. The recent violent pushback by Putin's Russia is a sharp thorn in America's side, but its misadventure in Ukraine means it will take years to rebuild its military and even then, as a declining power, it would struggle to be a serious threat to America on the global stage. When President Obama described Russia as no more than 'a regional power' in 2014 he may have been needlessly provocative, but he wasn't wrong. The bars of Russia's geographical prison, as seen in Chapter One, are still in place: it hasn't got a warm-water port with access to the global sea lanes and lacks the military capacity in wartime to reach the Atlantic via the Baltic and North seas or the Mediterranean.

The USA was partially behind the change of government in Ukraine in 2014. It wanted to extend democracy in the world and to pull Ukraine away from Russian influence and thus weaken President Putin. Washington knows that for twenty years, as America was distracted in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Russians took advantage in what they call their 'near abroad', seizing territory in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014. Belatedly, and somewhat half-heartedly, the Americans spent the years leading up to 2022 trying to claw back Russian gains, but it took tanks rolling across Ukraine's eastern border to spur them into action.

Americans usually care about Europe and about NATO, and they will sometimes act if it is in the American interest. The Russian onslaught was of a magnitude to make them focus and

massively increase military and intelligence support for Kyiv. Washington would have preferred Europe to shoulder most of the burden, but it was clear that the continent was unable to take care of its own backyard. Many Americans, in and out of Congress, did not hide their irritation at the decades during which their NATO allies failed to prepare for an event such as Ukraine – or worse.

That leaves the place the USA wants to focus on like a laser – China, because, despite stumbling, China continues to rise.

Most analysis written over the past two decades assumes that by the middle of the twenty-first century China will overtake the USA and become the leading superpower. For reasons partially discussed in Chapter Two, I am not convinced. If it does happen, it may take longer.

Economically the Chinese are on their way to matching the Americans, and that buys them a lot of influence and a place at the top table, but militarily and strategically they remain behind. The USA has spent the last ten years attempting to ensure it stays that way; trying to freeze China out of the super-semiconductor chip market is an example. Nevertheless, the gap has closed and, yes, will close further. The question is by how much.

The concrete costs a lot. Not just to mix and pour, but to be allowed to mix and pour it where you want to. As we saw with the 'Destroyers for Bases Agreement', American assistance to other governments is not always entirely altruistic. Economic and, equally importantly, military backing buys permission to pour the concrete, but much more as well, even if there is also an added cost.

For example, in 2017 Washington expressed outrage at human rights abuses in Syria (a hostile state); following a gas attack by the regime, President Trump even ordered a cruise missile strike. However, its condemnation of abuses in Bahrain were more difficult to hear, muffled as they have been by the engines of the US 5th Fleet, which is based in Bahrain as the guest of the Bahraini government. On the other hand, assistance does buy the ability to suggest to government B (say Myanmar) that it might want to resist the overtures of government C (say China). In that particular example the USA remains behind the curve, because when the Myanmar government began to open up to the world, Beijing had two advantages – its geography and its lack of enthusiasm for democracy.

But when it comes to Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and others, the Americans are pushing at a door already open due to those countries' anxiety about their giant neighbour and keenness to engage with Washington. They may all have issues with each other, but these are dwarfed by the knowledge that if they do not stand together they will be picked off one by one and eventually fall under Chinese hegemony.

The USA's famous 'pivot to Asia' under the Obama administration was taken by some to mean the abandonment of Europe; but a pivot towards one place does not mean the neglect of another. It is more a case of how much weight you put on which foot. Even before Donald Trump's first presidency the Americans were signalling that their patience with underfunded European defence budgets was limited. The Biden administration was more temperate in its language, but still favoured a limited and gradual drawdown of US military power from Europe as the continent built up its own defences while remaining within the NATO structure. The Ukraine War temporarily reversed that, but still reinforced the American demand that the Europeans pay their way, thus giving Washington more capacity to focus on points west of Hawaii. Trump 2.0 lost no time in returning to the argument.

Many US government foreign policy strategists are persuaded that the history of the twenty-first century will be written in Asia and the Pacific. Half of the world's population lives there, and if India is included it is expected to account for 50 per cent of global economic output by 2050.

Hence we see the USA increasingly investing time and money in South-East Asia and Oceania to cement its presence and intentions in the region. For example, in northern Australia the Americans have set up a base for the US Marine Corps and now conduct military exercises there alongside Australian and Japanese troops. In 2023 Washington agreed new basing rights for the US Navy in the Philippines. But to exert real influence it may also have to invest in limited military action to reassure its allies that it will come to their rescue in the event of hostilities. For example, if China begins shelling a Japanese destroyer and it looks as if it might take further military action, the US Navy may have to fire warning shots towards the Chinese navy, or even fire directly, to signal that it is willing to go to war over the incident. Equally, when North Korea fires at South Korea, the South fires back, but currently the USA does not. Instead it puts forces on alert in a public manner to send a signal. If the situation intensified it would then fire warning shots at a North Korean target, and finally direct shots. It's a way of escalating without declaring war – and this is when things get dangerous.

The USA is seeking to demonstrate to the whole region that it is in their best interests to side with Washington – China is doing the opposite. So, when challenged, each side must react, because for every challenge it ducks, its allies' confidence and competitors' fear slowly drains away until eventually there is an event that persuades a state to switch sides.

Analysts often write about the need for certain cultures not to lose face, or ever be seen to back down, but this is not just a problem in the Arab or East Asian countries – it is a human problem expressed in different ways. It may well be more defined and openly articulated in those two cultures, but American foreign policy strategists are as aware of the issue as any other power.

The deadly game in this century will be how the Chinese, Americans and others in the region manage each crisis that arises without losing face and without building up a deep well of resentment and anger on both sides.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is generally considered an American victory; what is less publicised is that several months after Russia removed its missiles from Cuba, the United States removed its Jupiter missiles (which could reach Moscow) from Turkey. It was actually a compromise, with both sides, eventually, able to tell their respective publics that they had not capitulated.

In the twenty-first-century Pacific there are more great-power compromises to be made. An example is Beijing's declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone requiring foreign nations to inform them before entering what is disputed territory, and the Americans deliberately flying through it without telling them. The Chinese gain something by declaring the zone and making it an issue; the USA gains something by being seen not to comply. Both compromise by not taking it further. Yet. It is a long game.

It is also a game of cat and mouse. In early 2016, for the first time, China landed a plane on one of the artificial mounds it has built in the Spratly Islands area of the South China Sea. Vietnam and the Philippines made formal protests as they both have claims on the area, and the USA described the move as threatening 'regional stability'. Washington now watches each construction project and flight, and has to pick and choose when and where it makes more vigorous protests or sends naval and air force patrols near the disputed territory. When, in

2024, Chinese ships in contested waters damaged a Philippine coastguard vessel using water cannon, it was just the latest in a long line of similar encounters. The USA issued a statement saying that it 'stands with its ally the Philippines and condemns the dangerous actions'. The statement was intended to reassure allies that it will back them and guarantee freedom of navigation in international areas, while simultaneously not going so far as to draw China into a military confrontation.

The previous year the Americans had a near miss. A Chinese warship deliberately cut across the bow of a US destroyer, coming within 150 metres of it, which, when you're dealing with that much metal, is seriously close. But neither incident was worth escalating, and after informing Beijing of its recklessness the US Navy moved on.

The US policy regarding the Japanese is to reassure them that they share strategic interests vis-à-vis China and ensure that the US base in Okinawa remains open. The Americans will help the Japanese Self-Defence Forces to be robust, but simultaneously restrict Japan's military ability to challenge the USA in the Pacific.

While all countries in the region matter, in what is a complicated diplomatic jigsaw puzzle, to the west of the South China Sea the three key states are Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. They sit astride the Strait of Malacca, which at its narrowest is less than 2 miles wide. Every day through that strait come 12 million barrels of oil heading for an increasingly thirsty China and elsewhere in the region. As long as these three countries are pro-America, the USA has a key advantage.

On the plus side, the Chinese are not politically ideological, they do not seek to spread communism, nor do they covet (much) more territory in the way the Russians did during the Cold War, and more recently in Europe. Neither side is looking for conflict. The Chinese can accept America guarding most of the sea lanes that deliver Chinese goods to the world, so long as the Americans understand that there will be limits to just how close to China that control extends.

There will be arguments, and nationalism will be used to ensure the unity of the Chinese people from time to time, but each side will be seeking compromise. The danger comes if they misread each other and/or gamble too much.

There are flashpoints, such as the American treaty with Taiwan. On several occasions President Biden's administration hinted it would go further than providing arms. A red line for China is formal recognition of Taiwan by the USA, or a declaration of independence by Taiwan.

As we saw in Chapter Two, there are compelling reasons why China might or might not roll the dice and invade, despite several senior American military officials predicting it *will* happen before 2030. That chapter outlines many problems that Beijing would encounter. Here are two more; one in the shape of an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, the other the Ohio-class nuclear-powered submarine. Both are examples of the technological advantage the US Navy enjoys over its Chinese equivalent, and of how even cutting-edge technology cannot escape the bounds of geography, but only change which bits of it might be important.

The USA has seventy-two Arleigh Burke-class vessels grouped in destroyer squadrons. When an American aircraft carrier moves out of its base a squadron goes with it. The destroyers have all manner of tech and weapons, anti-aircraft guns, surface-to-surface missiles, cruise missiles, anti-submarine equipment and more, but the jewel in their crown is the Aegis radar – the most sophisticated radar system ever built.

In the event of a conflict with the USA in the Western Pacific, China would attempt to keep the American navy as far away as possible by firing long-range ballistic missiles at it – especially the aircraft carriers. These missiles can reach heights above Earth's atmosphere, and

as they curve back down are travelling at speeds exceeding 2.5 miles a second. Traditional radar can track a ship or an aeroplane, but not a missile launched from beyond Earth's curve and moving at such speed.

Aegis can. The Aegis systems are able to track multiple missiles as soon as they are within range, simultaneously integrate the information with data from other ships and ground stations and launch anti-missile missiles.

In April 2024 two Aegis-equipped destroyers in the Mediterranean shot down several Iranian ballistic missiles as Tehran targeted Israel during the Gaza conflict. Others operating in the Red Sea downed numerous anti-ship missiles fired at them by the Houthis. This is why Aegis is called the 'Shield of the Fleet'.

The Chinese know what lies beneath – but they don't know where.

The USA operates the most sophisticated submarines in the world, especially the Ohio-class subs, and all of them are nuclear-powered, which makes them quiet. In the ocean, the quieter you are the less detectable you are, and in the Ohio-class there is the quiet American. China is improving its ability to find enemy submarines, and if it eventually makes its own vessels 'super-quiet' it will be a game changer. For now the USA remains ahead in the game of underwater cat and mouse. It's helped by its superior access to territory.

The USA has its own version of a 'string of pearls' in the Pacific. It consists of a chain of bases stretching across an ocean which at its widest is 12,000 miles. There are several ports along America's West Coast that host naval bases, including San Diego in California. Head west from there and 2,600 miles away is Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Another 3,300 miles and you reach the US base in Guam. After that the USA has military basing agreements with the Philippines 1,500 miles away. Both Pearl Harbor and Guam have submarine bases, there's another up in Tokyo Bay, and *in extremis* US subs might be able to use South Korean ports – three made visits there in 2023.

In total the US military has access to more than seventy land, air and navy installations in the Pacific. This gives it an often-overlooked geographical advantage over China related to submarines – the SOFAR channel.

The US military has numerous bases across the Pacific which are key to its strategy in the region.

SOFAR stands for Sound Fixing and Ranging. Towards the end of the Second World War scientists discovered that at a certain depth there are acoustic channels in the oceans that can carry low-frequency sound for hundreds of miles (water is an excellent conductor of sound). If you were to lay undersea cables along the channels and space underwater microphones (hydrophones) on them, you would be able to hear the sounds a submarine makes and track it. During the Cold War the Americans developed a global underwater acoustic surveillance network known as the Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS) and they've been building on it ever since.

The most efficient placement of hydrophones for military surveillance is near a coast. This allows a higher level of security, ease of access and for the instruments to be linked by cable back to the shoreline. This is where the American advantage kicks in. The locations of the hydrophones are classified, but without doubt the USA has a network of them stretching across the Pacific, connecting to the bases they have at regular intervals. China cannot match this. Of course it has its own hydrophones off its continental shelf, and it deploys underwater vehicles fitted with them, but it doesn't have a Guam, a Pearl Harbor or a Tokyo Bay. Or indeed – a Taiwan. What it does have is a barrier in the shape of the First Island Chain – and underwater sound tends not to carry through a land mass, so China's listening range is limited.

Washington knows that if it wants to keep the various advantages it has over its great twenty-first-century rival it must focus. It's been trying to for years but gets distracted, as shown recently by Ukraine and Gaza. However, these are diversions. The USA still intends to reduce its military global footprint in order to increase a regional one – the region being the Pacific. Europe and the Middle East are important but are secondary issues.

As China's thirst for foreign oil and gas grows, so that of the United States declines. This will have a huge impact on its foreign relations, especially in the Middle East, with knock-on effects for other countries.

Due to offshore drilling in US coastal waters and underground fracking across huge regions of the country, America became a net exporter of energy in 2019. This reduces its focus on ensuring a flow of oil and gas supplies from the Gulf region, but it does still import energy from there and it will take years, and an increase in green energy production, before it abandons the area.

Nevertheless, as American attention slowly wanes, the Gulf nations will seek new alliances. One candidate will be Iran, another China, but that will only happen when the Chinese have built their blue-water navy and, equally importantly, are prepared to deploy it.

The US 5th Fleet is not about to sail away from its port in Bahrain – that is a piece of concrete it would give up reluctantly. However, eventually, when the energy supplies of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar are no longer required to keep American lights on and cars on the road, the American public and Congress will ask: 'What is it there for?' If the response is 'To check Iran', it may not be enough to quash the debate.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, US policy in the short term is to prevent Iran from becoming too strong while at the same time reaching for what is known as the grand bargain – an agreement settling the many issues that divide the two countries and ending almost five decades of enmity. The policy has given the Biden and Trump administrations the same headaches as their predecessors.

Trump went in hard against Iran, albeit stopping short of military action. Sanctions continued to hurt the regime in 2018 as the USA pulled out of the joint comprehensive plan of action – better known as the Iran Nuclear Deal – in which Tehran had agreed to halt activity related to its nuclear programme. In 2019 the USA followed up by designating the elite Revolutionary Guard Corps as a 'foreign terrorist organisation'. This was the first time it had labelled another country's military as such, and it allowed the administration to go after the guards' massive business interests via further sanctions.

However, neither side wants war. The deal had pretty much collapsed by 2023, when the Europeans managed to at least stitch together an agreement with the United Nations' nuclear watchdog over how to expand inspections of the Islamic Republic's advancing programme. Tehran has not exactly played ball since, but its anxieties about regime survival were heightened by the re-election of Trump.

Washington is aware that when it comes to events in the 'Wider Middle East' Tehran gets a vote on what happens. The Israel–Gaza crisis that started in 2023, and which brought in its proxies Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, was a stark reminder of this.

With the Arab nations engaged in a struggle with armed Islamists which still has years to run, Washington looks as if it has given up on the optimistic idea of encouraging Jeffersonian democracies to emerge and will concentrate on attempting to manage the situation while at the same time desperately trying not to get sand on the boots of US soldiers.

The close relationship with Israel may cool, albeit slowly, as the demographics of the USA change. The children of the Hispanic and Asian immigrants now arriving in the United States will be more interested in Latin America and the Far East than in a tiny country on the edge of a region no longer vital to American interests. However, that is a long way off. American support for Israel during the Israel–Hamas conflict may have been qualified at times, but the relationship still held.

Support for the Jewish people's right to a state in their historic homeland remains strong at both government and population level and began in 1948 when President Truman was the first world leader to recognise the country. Israel is the only real functioning democracy in the Middle East and the two countries share values and interests, but there's a religious basis for some Americans' support. Many evangelical Protestants believe that Jesus had a back-up plan in case the Jews didn't accept him as the Messiah. He can only return, amid the End Times, after God has gathered the Jews back to Israel to rebuild the temple destroyed by the Romans circa 70 ce. According to the Book of Revelation, during this period the Moon becomes like blood and the sky is split apart. Then . . . it's Armageddon! On the plus side there's a New Heaven and a New Earth.

Pending this, and looking to other points around the globe, the USA's policy in Latin America is still to ensure that the Panama Canal remains open, to keep an eye on the rise of Brazil in case it gets any ideas about its influence in the Caribbean Sea, and to push back against the growing economic power of China in the region. On the latter, it's on the back foot.

In the last decade the number of Chinese projects south of the Rio Grande rose by more than 30 per cent. Chinese companies have been involved in few major infrastructure programmes, but increasingly they focus on what they call 'new infrastructure' – industries such as telecommunications, EVs and green energy. For example, Huawei is building cloud computing and cybersecurity centres for clients in Peru, Argentina and Chile. In 2023 China sold more EVs in Latin America than all the American car firms combined, and in 2024 its biggest electric car maker, BYD, announced it would build an EV factory in Mexico.

Washington is trying to respond. In 2024 the Americas Act was put before Congress to encourage firms to pull out of China and move operations to Latin America. Those that do will find it crowded. At the turn of the century China accounted for less than 2 per cent of Latin America's exports, but in 2025 it was the region's second-largest trading partner (after the USA). That buys foreign strategic influence in the very region that the Monroe Doctrine dictates should not be tolerated (except of course for American influence). As Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2021: 'We are losing our positional advantage in this Hemisphere and immediate action is needed to reverse this trend.' It's a work in progress.

The USA aims to counter Chinese (and Russian) influence in countries such as Colombia, Venezuela and any other place where it thinks its interests might be threatened, but it is in Cuba that it feels its security could be most at risk. It continues to try to ensure that it dominates the post-Castro era, just as it has ever since the victory over Spain in 1898.

President Obama's historic visit to Cuba in the spring of 2016 was an attempt to get the new era off to a good start. He was the first sitting US president to visit Havana since Calvin Coolidge in 1928. Fidel Castro huffed and puffed about the event, and the state-controlled media dutifully reported his negative remarks, but there was a sense that this was only to keep the old man happy; the collective decision had been made, change was in the air.

And then a new American president was elected. After taking office, Donald Trump followed through on campaign pledges. In 2017 restrictions were placed on US companies doing business with Cuban firms with ties to the military. The majority of the staff at the American embassy returned home and the processing of most visas was suspended. In 2019 cruise ships were barred from sailing between the two countries and educational exchanges were banned. As a parting shot the Trump administration redesignated Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism.

In came Biden, pledging to reverse the reverses Trump had made to Obama's policy. There was an easing of some restrictions, but a genuine rapprochement has been put on hold again following nationwide anti-government protests during which Havana responded with a wave of arrests and censorship. The USA is also concerned about the links between Cuba and the anti-American leadership in Venezuela. Washington is reluctant to bail out what remains, at best, a suspicious neighbour with strong ties to China and Russia even though Cuba's economic plight fuels America's migrant crisis. Between 2021 and 2024 more than 550,000 Cubans showed up at the southern US border after flying into various South American countries. Washington still wants better relations across the Florida Straits, and to move back in economically, but the hope of the Obama visit has foundered on the rocks of a bigger geopolitical map.

In Africa, the Americans are one of several nations seeking the continent's natural wealth, but the nation finding most of it is China, with Russia making inroads. The USA also has military concerns there including in the Sahel region, which lies below the Sahara Desert and stretches from the Red Sea across to the Atlantic. As in the Middle East, the Americans watch the Islamist struggle in North Africa and the Sahel with interest, but try not to get involved much closer than 30,000 feet above the ground. This policy has taken a hammer blow in recent years.

Until 2024 the USA used its bases in the Sahel to track jihadists, insurgent groups and people/drugs traffickers (often the same thing). From Chad and Niger drones took off and flew over huge areas of the Sahel. Now, not so much. The Americans have been forced to move troops out following coups d'état which brought to power military juntas with close ties to Russia. They are unlikely to try to return in force, especially on the ground. Their experiment with nation-building overseas appears to be over.

In Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, the USA underestimated the mentality and strength of small powers and of tribes. The Americans' own history of physical security and unity may have led them to overestimate the cogency of their democratic rationalist argument, which believes that compromise, hard work and even voting would triumph over atavistic, deep-seated historical fears of 'the other', be they Sunni, Shia, Kurd, Arab, Muslim or Christian. They assumed that people would want to come together, whereas in fact many dare not try and would prefer to live apart because of their experiences. It is a sad reflection upon humanity, but it appears throughout many periods of history, and in many places, to be an unfortunate truth. The American interventions took the lid off a simmering pot which had temporarily hidden that truth.

This does not make American policymakers 'naive', as some of the snootier European diplomats like to believe; but they do have a 'can do' and a 'can fix' attitude, which inevitably will not always work.

The re-election of Trump has again demonstrated that democracies are not immune to the cult of personality and the attraction of a strongman with easy answers to hard questions. He was the result of an increasing disdain among sections of the Western electorates for 'politics as usual'. During his first presidency the 'America first' mantra was put into action, especially in economic policy, but in some respects he didn't break from the truism that 'America has presidents and it has interests; the presidents come and go – the interests remain.' After all, previous presidents felt it was in the USA's interests to curtail North Korea's nuclear expansion, to persuade NATO countries to spend more on defence and to prevent the rise of one overly dominant power on the European continent. Biden continued those policies but used more diplomatic language. Trump may damage the moral stature of the USA as the

leader of the free world, and indeed the presidency, but some of this is down to his belligerence rather than the sudden complete reversal of decades of policy.

During the 2024 election campaign Trump continued to play with fire, thus risking setting fire to the world. Loose talk about not necessarily guaranteeing NATO's policy that an attack on one member state is an attack on all of them were the words of a man with an acute sense of populism but dull awareness of how allies help America. However, despite the overblown anxiety after he first came to power in 2017, American foreign policy did not dramatically change course. Yes, he pulled out of arms treaties with Russia regarding Europe, but he engaged in arms reduction talks on the nuclear issue. The 'pivot to Asia' had begun already, as had the loosening of ties with Europe. In the Middle East the USA has only ever truly focused when it thought its interests might be harmed. Even the tearing up of the Iran nuclear deal was not a revolutionary change in American foreign policy but a return to Washington's previous harder line. Declining to join the 2015 Paris climate agreement was not a global game changer – many individual US states are committed to meeting its targets. California is one and its economy is bigger than every country in the world other than Germany, China, Japan and the USA itself. At the grand strategic level, the USA is mostly behaving as it has behaved before, although the second Trump administration arrived with a more aggressive and public stance towards its allies.

For fifty years it has been fashionable to predict the imminent or ongoing decline of the USA. Despite the deep internal divisions it is experiencing (which it has undergone before), this is as wrong now as it was in the past.

The planet's most successful country is self-sufficient in energy and remains the pre-eminent economic power. Figures for 2023 show that its defence budget accounted for about 40 per cent of global military spending, more than the next nine biggest spenders combined. Its population is not ageing as dramatically as in Europe and Japan and, in a list of countries with the highest levels of immigration, it has more immigrants (50 million) than the next four countries combined – Germany, Saudi Arabia, Russia and the UK. In 2013 Shanghai University listed what its experts judged the top twenty universities of the world: seventeen were in the USA. In 2023 fifteen made the top twenty.

A failing country? In 2008, the year of the banking crash, the US and Eurozone economies were worth about the same – roughly $14 trillion each. In 2024 the Eurozone economy was just over $15 trillion; the American economy just under $30 trillion. In Asia it has economic and defence ties with a host of friendly countries and its relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) remains strong. Its navy, air force and space-based capabilities are ahead of its main competitor.

Over the past decade the American tendency to flirt with isolationism has resurfaced. The debate is ongoing. On the one side is the argument that the USA is self-sufficient and powerful enough not to need to embroil itself in alliances or conflicts far from its shores. Tax dollars should be spent on America first, not on underwriting the security of Europe, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

Against this the case is made that pulling back from Europe will leave Russia free to dominate the continent and control a major part of the world's food supplies. Pulling out of commitments to South Korea and Japan and abandoning Taiwan would lead to South Korea being under China's thumb, Taiwan overseen by China, and Japan potentially ending up fighting China. This would result in China controlling the world's most important shipping lanes and an American retreat across the Pacific.

To maintain its advantages, and in recognition of the growth of many nations' powers, the USA has forged an alliance of alliances – some of which overlap, creating a global network that Washington can call on when required. The most important, NATO, took a battering the moment Trump returned to the White House. His defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, told the Europeans: 'Stark strategic realities prevent the United States of America from being primarily focused on Europe.' If the primary focus points are the US economy and China, it follows that Washington wants more money to meet the challenge of China's rise in the Pacific, not Russian aggression in Europe.

The following week Secretary of State Marco Rubio travelled to Germany to attend the 2025 Munich Security Conference, lectured the Europeans about their military budgets and values, and then flew out to engage in talks with Russia about Ukraine without inviting anyone from London, Paris, Rome, Berlin or, indeed, Kyiv to attend.

Attempting to 'reset' the relationship with Russia was also a way to try to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. The US strategy vis-a vis China includes strengthening ties with India via the Quad – a loose naval agreement between Australia, Japan, India and the USA; signing the AUKUS submarine deal with Australia and the UK; linking its own Pacific military command with those of Japan and the Philippines; creating the Artemis Accords for joint space exploration; and committing to agreements with friendly nations to prevent the authoritarian countries gaining access to the most powerful super-semiconductor chips required to win the AI and tech race.

Its ability to create and lead most of these alliances comes from its power, and as we saw in the introduction to this chapter, that partially flows from its geography. Geography still protects and benefits the Republic.

The Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck, in a double-edged remark, said more than a century ago that 'God takes special care of drunks, children and the United States of America.' It appears still to be true.