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BEYOND AMERICAN PREDOMINANCE IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC: THE NEED FOR A STABLE U.S.-CHINA BALANCE OF POWER

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In 2011, I argued in a book entitled *America’s Challenge: Engaging a Rising China in the Twenty-First Century*, that, while Washington and Beijing are by no means fated to enter into a hot or even a cold war, the competing assumptions they hold regarding the necessary conditions for long-term stability and prosperity in Asia, if not moderated through a process of mutual accommodation, would likely result in steady movement toward a zero-sum, adversarial mind-set. I wrote that this dynamic could eventually polarize the region and undermine the goals of continued peace and prosperity toward which all sides strive. Unfortunately, in the past three years, this type of mind-set has deepened, in and out of both governments and across much of Asia. Indeed, the international media, along with a coterie of regional and international relations specialists, increasingly seem to interpret every action taken by one government, no matter how small, as being by necessity designed to diminish the position of the other.

Even more worrisome, this deepening mind-set is driving policy statements and recommendations in Beijing and Washington that serve to reinforce and strengthen, rather than moderate, the differences between the two sides. While China’s leader, Xi Jinping, speaks of the need to develop an “Asia for Asians” and to create a new regional security architecture as an alternative to the “Cold War era” U.S.-led bilateral alliance structure, American policymakers and analysts criticize Beijing for establishing an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea of the sort long possessed by Washington and Tokyo and encourage other Asian states to resist joining Chinese-initiated economic institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

CLASHING ASSUMPTIONS ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE ASIAN ORDER

The core assumptions underlying this negative dynamic juxtapose, on the one side, the post-World War II American notion that long-term order and prosperity depend on the unique leadership role and dominant military power of the United States as a security guarantor, dispute arbiter, deterrent force, supporter of international law, and provider of public goods for states located in critical regions of the world, including the maritime Asia-Pacific. Indeed, for virtually all U.S. officials and many Asian leaders, American military predominance, meaning the clear ability to defeat any potential



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military challenge to U.S. and allied interests anywhere along the Asian littoral and across the Western Pacific, from the continental United States to the Indian Ocean, has provided the foundation for a seventy-year-long period of relative peace and economic growth throughout most of the region. In this view, U.S. maritime primacy has forestalled arms races and armed disputes over long-standing rivalries and permitted a sustained focus on peaceful economic development.

On the other side, the Chinese espouse the belief that order and prosperity, especially in an increasingly multipolar and interdependent world, should rely on a largely benign and roughly equal balance of power between the major nations, rooted in the need to cooperate to manage an arguably increasing number of common challenges and mediated, whenever possible, through international institutions such as the United Nations. In this more broadly dispersed yet hierarchical power structure, stronger powers have a duty both to guide and shape smaller powers in mutually beneficial directions, not to dominate and manipulate them. In this world, no single power should have the ability or the intention to keep other powers in a condition of military or political subservience, and no power should seriously infringe on the sovereignty of another power without the endorsement of the international community.

To some extent, these U.S. and Chinese views are self-serving. While taking on many burdens across the globe in defending public goods such as sea lines of communication and enduring persistent trade deficits in order to stimulate global development, Washington nonetheless benefits enormously from a U.S.-led international order in which its views and preferences are given special consideration. Its military power and economic clout ensure a privileged position in major finance, trade, and security-oriented regimes, meaning that the makeup, purpose, and rules of those regimes largely reflect its power and interests, operate in ways that affirm U.S. views on the most critical issues, and cannot be changed in major ways without Washington's approval. Conversely, the Chinese seem to believe that a genuine balance-of-power system and a strengthened process of rules-based, international decision-making—meaning that no single power has the clear unilateral ability to compel others to accept its rules and procedures—will benefit China by giving it a greater voice among nations

and serving to restrain a supposedly arrogant, unilateralist, and at times threatening the United States.

Aside from such obvious self-interest, however, policy communities in both nations genuinely believe that their preferred international distribution of power best reflects the current and future reality of the international system: For most Americans, despite the forces of globalization, which are creating ever more dispersed and interdependent levels of economic, political, social, and military power among nations, peace and stability only results from the unique ability of a single, relatively benign superpower to shape, lead, and deter major threats to global peace and prosperity. For the Chinese, all major industrialized powers seek to control the international order in ways that can and at times do weaken or threaten lesser (and especially developing) powers and to varying degrees diminish the overall stability and prosperity of the system. However, in light of the steady diffusion of power occurring across the international system, many Chinese also believe that even the most powerful states will need to overcome their drive for dominance and cooperate in unprecedented ways.

Despite such stark differences, these views coexisted more or less peacefully for many decades after World War II, primarily because Beijing had neither the capacity nor the desire to alter the U.S.-dominated order, both globally and in maritime Asia. From the 1950s through the late 1970s, China was wracked by economically and socially destructive Maoist ideological campaigns and internecine political struggles, and it was threatened by the Soviet Union, its huge, better-armed continental neighbor to the north. Such problems not only distracted China's leaders for decades but also eventually compelled them to embark on an unprecedented overture to the West, both to counter the Soviet Union and to facilitate the kind of market-driven economic development strategy that was needed to reestablish China as a major regional and possibly global power. In fact, under such conditions, many Chinese viewed American predominance in maritime Asia and the U.S.-led alliance system that sustained it as on balance beneficial to China. It kept the Soviets largely out of the region, kept Japan nonmilitarized and oriented toward peace, and allowed Beijing's Asian neighbors to concentrate on outward-oriented, beneficial economic growth instead of

disruptive arms races or historical rivalries. Washington was only too happy to oblige Beijing in sustaining such an order.

All this is now changing, at least in Asia. China's overseas trade- and investment-driven economic success, the collapse of the Soviet Union and other Communist regimes, and the fear—intensified by the massive Tiananmen demonstrations and bloody crackdown of 1989 as well as the more recent color revolutions—that the Chinese regime could be the next to fall, have vastly increased China's dependence on and influence over external economic, political, and social forces across Asia and beyond, while deepening its sense of vulnerability and suspicion toward the United States. Prior to the reform era, China's wealth and power derived largely from domestic sources, many located far from its coastline, and its security relied, by necessity, on a largely peasant-based but massive army and only rudimentary air and naval forces. These factors, along with its acquisition of a small nuclear weapons arsenal in the 1960s, made it possible for Beijing to rely on a security strategy of nuclear deterrence through a modest second-strike capability and attrition through a protracted conventional defense centered on "luring the enemy in deep."¹

This strategy can no longer provide adequate security for China. Beijing must now defend against threats before they can reach the Chinese homeland and vital coastal economic centers. For the first time in its history, Beijing now has both the ability and the motivation to seek to diminish significantly if not eliminate the potential threat to its domestic and growing regional economic interests posed by America's long-standing predominance in the Western Pacific. Indeed, its ongoing acquisition of military capabilities designed in large part to counter or complicate U.S. and allied air, naval, missile, space, and cyber operations along its maritime periphery, as well as its increasing economic and political-diplomatic initiatives across the Asian littoral and its call for a new, post-Cold War cooperative security architecture for the Asia-Pacific, partly serve such ends. Moreover, the desire to reduce America's past maritime superiority and economic power has become more achievable and hence more compelling to many Chinese as a result not only of China's continued economic success but also of the troubles now plaguing America and the West, from anemic economic growth and domestic political dysfunction

to image concerns resulting from arguably unjust Middle East wars and apparent egregious human rights abuses.

This should not be surprising to anyone who understands modern Chinese history and great power transitions. Beijing has an ongoing and likely long-term and deep incentive to work with the United States and the West to sustain continued, mutually beneficial economic growth and to address a growing array of common global and regional concerns, from pandemics to climate change and terrorism. At the same time, it understandably wishes to reduce its vulnerability to potential future threats from the United States and other politically and militarily strong nations, while increasing its overall influence along its strategically important maritime periphery. As Beijing's overseas power and influence grow, its foreign interests expand, and its domestic nationalist backers become more assertive, it will naturally become less willing to accept or acquiesce in international political and economic relationships, norms, and power structures that it believes disproportionately and unjustly favor Western powers; put China at a strategic, political, or economic disadvantage; or generally fail to reflect movement toward a more multipolar global and regional power structure. It will also likely become more fearful that a declining (in relative terms) Washington will regard an increasingly influential China as a threat to be countered through ever more forceful or deliberate measures. Indeed, this view is already widespread among many Chinese observers.

One does not need to cast Beijing as an evil or predatory entity to understand the forces driving such beliefs. They stem from national self-interest, historical insecurity (and nationalist pride), suspicion, fear, and uncertainty. To some degree, they also stem from a level of opportunism, driven in part by fear, but also in part by the understandable desire to take advantage of China's growing regional and global influence and America's apparent relative decline in order to strengthen Chinese leverage in possible future disputes.

At the same time, heightened Chinese nationalism, arising from a combination of impressive economic success and a much greater public awareness, through social media and other means, of China's external policies and influence, has greatly accentuated a self-righteous assertiveness in Chinese foreign and defense policy. Many Chinese observers now

believe that Beijing's past weakness and its need to cooperate with the United States and the West in general had made it too accommodating or passive in dealing with many perceived challenges to China's vital national interests, from U.S. support for Taiwan and Asian disputants over maritime claims, to close-in U.S. surveillance and intelligence-gathering activities along the Chinese coast. For these analysts, China's growing capabilities and influence, along with its expanding interests, make it both possible and necessary for Beijing to defend such interests in a more deliberate and in some cases a more forceful manner. Moreover, the intensity of emotion and resolve that usually accompanies such views is often associated with deep resentment of the allegedly sanctimonious arrogance of a hegemonic America.

The more extreme variants of this ultranationalist viewpoint threaten to transform China's long-standing peaceful development policy, keyed to the maintenance of amicable relations with the United States and other powers, into a much more hard-edged approach that is deliberately and perhaps openly calibrated to undermine U.S. influence in Asia. In fact, there have been indications of some possible first steps in this direction, reflected in the so-called bottom-line concept of Xi Jinping's foreign policy, which stresses the need for China to stand resolute in managing territorial and sovereignty issues, such as the disputes with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and with Vietnam, the Philippines, and others over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Despite a continued stress on the search for "win-win" outcomes with all powers, such trends could eventually weaken existing Chinese support for a cooperative and peace-oriented foreign policy and for movement toward a genuine balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, favoring instead a more Sino-centric Asian order.

On the U.S. side, for an arguably growing number of American and some foreign observers, Beijing's de facto challenge to American predominance in the Western Pacific is a mere prelude to a larger effort to eject the United States from Asia and eventually replace it as the regional (and for some, global) superpower. Chinese support for a multipolar, balance-of-power system is thus seen as a mere tactical feint designed to undermine U.S. power while Beijing prepares to become the new hegemon. Indeed, for such observers, Beijing's greater

assertiveness regarding maritime territorial disputes as well as U.S. and Japanese intelligence and surveillance activities along its coastline constitute strategic gambits designed to "test" U.S. and allied resolve and ultimately to create "no-go" zones essential for the establishment of Chinese control over the Western Pacific. Such an outcome would directly threaten both U.S. and allied interests in an open, secure, and peaceful Asia-Pacific region. Given this supposedly unambiguous threat, for these observers, the only logical course of action for the United States is to decisively disabuse Beijing of its aspirations by enhancing American predominance and thereby increasing, rather than reducing, Chinese vulnerability in the Western Pacific.

This view is held not only by scholars and policy analysts outside Washington. It is also fairly common among U.S. government officials, both civilian and military. It offers a black-and-white, Manichean-type solution to a supposedly clear-cut threat, and one that is extremely appealing to those many U.S. policymakers and analysts convinced of the huge merits (and necessity) of continued American predominance in maritime Asia. In fact, even for those who reject the notion that Beijing is working to dislodge the United States from the region, predominance remains the best insurance against an uncertain future, for the reasons outlined above. While the type of U.S. predominance in Asia espoused by most U.S. observers can vary somewhat, depending in part on how one views China's capabilities and intentions, the bottom line for virtually all such individuals is the need for a clear U.S. ability to prevail in any important military-political contingency involving China. Moreover, this view is reinforced, in their minds, by the notion that America's allies and friends also supposedly desire and require continued U.S. maritime predominance.

The problem with this outlook is that it is based on an inaccurate, increasingly unrealistic, and dangerous assessment of both the threat the United States confronts in Asia and the likely consequences of the remedy proposed. Beijing's de facto attempts to limit or end U.S. predominance along its maritime periphery are motivated almost entirely by uncertainties, fears, insecurities, and a certain level of opportunism, not a grand strategic vision of Chinese predominance, despite the arguably growing expression of ultranationalist views within China. Those who view China as an aspiring hegemon

seeking America's subordination and ultimate ejection from Asia almost without exception base their argument on shaky theoretical postulates and faulty historical analogies or on the decidedly non-authoritative views of a few Chinese analysts, not current, hard evidence regarding either Chinese strategies and doctrines or Chinese behavior, past and present.

Such observers argue that all rising powers seek hard-power dominance in an anarchic interstate system and that China is a power that always sought to dominate its world. However, such absolutist beliefs run counter to the very mixed record of power grabbing and power balancing, aggression and restraint, deterrence and reassurance that has characterized great power relations historically. They also ignore the fact that, in the premodern era, Chinese predominance within its part of Asia most often consisted of pragmatic and mutually beneficial exchanges of ritualistic deference for material gains, not Chinese hard-power control. While implying a preference for symbolically hierarchical relationships with smaller neighbors, China's premodern approach did not amount to a demand for clear-cut dominance and subordination. Moreover, the advent of modern, independent, and in most cases strong nation-states along China's borders; the forces of economic globalization; and the existence of nuclear weapons have enormously reduced, if not eliminated, both the willingness and the ability of Chinese leaders today to dominate Asia and carve out an exclusionary sphere of influence, especially in hard-power terms. By necessity, their objective is to reduce their considerable vulnerability and increase their political, diplomatic, and economic leverage in their own backyard to a level where Chinese interests must be reflected in those major political, economic, and security actions undertaken by neighboring states. This is a much less ambitious and in many ways understandable goal for a continental great power. And it does not necessarily threaten vital U.S. or allied interests.

THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF AMERICAN PREDOMINANCE AND THE CHINESE RESPONSE

While continued American predominance cannot, at present, be justified on the basis of a Chinese drive for predominance, what of the widespread argument in U.S. policy circles that such predominance is necessary regardless of Chinese

intentions, as the best possible means of ensuring regional (and global) order? While deeply rooted in both American exceptionalism and beliefs about the benefits of hegemonic power in the international order, the notion that unequivocal U.S. predominance in the Western Pacific constitutes the only basis for long-term stability and prosperity across the Asia-Pacific is a dangerous, increasingly obsolete concept, for several reasons.

First, it is inconceivable that Beijing would accept the unambiguously superior level of American predominance that the many proponents of this course of action believe is required to ensure long-term regional stability in the face of a rising China, involving total U.S. "freedom of action" and a clear "ability to prevail" militarily without excessive costs in any conceivable contingency occurring up to China's mainland borders. The United States would never tolerate such predominance by any power along its borders, and why should an increasingly strong China? Given China's expanding interests and capabilities, any effort to sustain an unambiguous, absolute level of American military superiority along Beijing's maritime periphery will virtually guarantee an increasingly destabilizing and economically draining arms race, much greater levels of regional polarization and friction than at present, and reduced incentives on the part of both Washington and Beijing to work together to address a growing array of common global challenges.

U.S. efforts to sustain and enhance its military superiority in China's backyard will further stoke Beijing's worst fears and beliefs about American containment, sentiments inevitably reinforced by domestic nationalist pressures, ideologically informed beliefs about supposed U.S. imperialist motives, and China's general commitment to the enhancement of a multipolar order. In fact, by locking in a clear level of long-term vulnerability and weakness for Beijing that prevents any assured defense of Chinese territory or any effective wielding of influence over regional-security-related issues (such as maritime territorial disputes, Taiwan, or the fate of the Korean Peninsula), absolute U.S. military superiority would virtually guarantee fierce and sustained domestic criticism of any Chinese leadership that accepted it. This will be especially true if, as expected, Chinese economic power continues to grow, bolstering Chinese self-confidence. Under such conditions,

effectively resisting a U.S. effort to sustain predominance along China's maritime periphery would become a matter of political survival for future Chinese leaders.

Second, and equally important, it is far from clear that American military predominance in the Asia-Pacific region can be sustained on a consistent basis, just as it is virtually impossible that China could establish its own predominance in the region. Two Carnegie reports on the long-term security environment in Asia, *China's Military and the U.S.-Japan Alliance in 2030* and *Conflict and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region*,² concluded that, while the United States will remain the strongest military power on a global level indefinitely, Washington will almost certainly confront increasingly severe, economically induced defense spending limitations that will constrain efforts to decisively keep well ahead of a growing Chinese military and paramilitary presence within approximately 1,500 nautical miles of the Chinese coastline, that is, the area covered by so-called first and second island chains. This will occur despite Washington's repeated assertion that the rebalance to Asia will sustain America's predominant position in the region. Moreover, such largely economic constraints will almost certainly be magnified by the persistence of tensions and conflicts in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East and Central Europe. These events are likely to complicate any U.S. effort to shift forces (and resources) to the Asia-Pacific.

Of course, a continuing U.S. capacity to shift military assets from other parts of the globe to Asia in a crisis or conflict could conceivably correct America's relative military decline in the Western Pacific. But such a surge-based "solution" would require considerable time to implement, while any future threatening Chinese military action, for example, with regard to Taiwan or maritime disputes near its border, would almost certainly involve a very rapid strike aimed at establishing a fait accompli that could prove extremely difficult and costly to undo. Equally important, a growing day-to-day Chinese capability and presence along the Asian littoral and a perceived relative U.S. military decline in daily presence would inevitably affect the security calculations of other Asian states, especially American allies and friends, regardless of the overall ramp-up capacity of the U.S. military in any confrontation. In the current, increasingly competitive U.S.-China

relationship, a clear relative shift in day-to-day regional power toward China would likely cause such states to hedge more deliberately against a U.S. failure to prevail in a crisis or conflict by developing stronger, more independent, and potentially destabilizing military capabilities and/or by accommodating Chinese interests, possibly at the expense of the United States, for example, by spurning past or future security arrangements with Washington.

The limits on U.S. maritime predominance do not mean that China will eventually grow into the position of Asia's next military hegemon, however. The above-mentioned Carnegie reports also concluded that American military power in Asia will remain very strong under all but the most unlikely, worst-case scenarios involving a U.S. withdrawal from the region. While China's regional military capabilities will continue to grow significantly in key areas such as submarines and surface warships, ballistic and cruise missiles, offensive aircraft, air defense, and joint warfare, they will not provide an unambiguous level of superiority over U.S. forces in the Western Pacific, and certainly not in any other region. Therefore, any eventual Chinese attempt to establish predominance in Asia would almost inevitably fail, and not only because of U.S. capabilities and resolve, but also because such an effort would drive regional states much closer to the United States. The result would be either a cold or a hot war in Asia, with intensifying polarization, arms races, and an increased likelihood of crises and conflicts.

The Chinese leaders understand this and hence might only seek some form of predominance (as opposed to acting opportunistically and in a more limited manner) if American words and actions were to convince them that even the minimal level of security they seek were to require it. Such a belief could emerge if Washington insists on maintaining its own historical level of military superiority in Asia by attempting to neutralize entirely Chinese military capabilities right up to China's 12-nautical-mile territorial waters and airspace or to develop a force capable of blockading China from a distance. Variants of operational concepts currently under consideration in U.S. policy circles, such as Air-Sea Battle or Offshore Control (the former designed to defeat Beijing through preemptive, precision strikes deep into Chinese territory, and the latter to throttle China via a blockade along the

first island chain bordering the eastern and southern Chinese mainland), contain such features. Indeed, any effort to sustain U.S. predominance in the face of a growing relative decline in U.S. capabilities alongside steady increases in Chinese power and influence will almost certainly intensify the U.S.-China security competition, deepen tensions between the two powers, and greatly unsettle U.S. allies and friends.

Fortunately, this zero-sum dynamic has yet to emerge, but growing suspicions and beliefs in both capitals—founded on the above clashing assumptions held by each side regarding the necessary conditions for long-term order and prosperity in Asia—are certainly moving events in this direction.

Of course, a fundamental shift in the Asian power balance and its likely consequences will become moot if China's economy collapses or declines to such a level that it is unable to meaningfully challenge American maritime predominance. Indeed, for some analysts of the Asian security scene, such a possibility is real enough to justify a rejection of any consideration of alternatives to such predominance. But the above-mentioned reports, *China's Military and the U.S.-Japan Alliance in 2030* and *Conflict and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region*, found that such an adverse outcome for China is highly unlikely in any foreseeable time frame. Equally important, a major delay in adjusting to current and likely future realities due to a misplaced belief in China's ultimate decline will make it far more difficult to undertake adjustments years hence, given both the long lead time required to implement them and the likelihood that mutual suspicions will have by then deepened to the point where neither side is willing to make the required accommodations.

THE NEED TO TRANSITION TO A STABLE BALANCE OF POWER

Thus, for both the United States and China, the primary future strategic challenge is to develop a mutually beneficial means of transitioning away from U.S. maritime predominance toward a stable, genuine balance of power in the Western Pacific in which neither nation has the clear capacity to prevail in an armed conflict. This will be difficult to achieve

and potentially dangerous, but nonetheless necessary, given the existing and future trends shaping the region.

In general, true balance-of-power environments can at least potentially increase both risk taking and miscalculation, especially if one or both sides conclude that they must confirm or consolidate a perceived increase—or compensate for a perceived decline—in leverage by acting more aggressively to test the resolve of the other side, advance specific interests, or manage a serious political-military crisis. Avoiding or effectively controlling such situations will require not only a variety of crisis management mechanisms and confidence-building mechanisms (CBMs) beyond what have been developed thus far in Asia, but also high levels of mutual strategic reassurance and restraint, involving substantive and verifiable limits on each side's freedom of action or ability to prevail militarily along China's sensitive maritime periphery, as well as the maintenance of deterrent and shaping capabilities in those areas that count most.

Many knowledgeable observers have offered a variety of recommendations designed to reduce mistrust and enhance cooperation between Washington and Beijing, involving everything from caps on U.S. and Chinese defense spending to mutual, limited concessions or understandings regarding Taiwan and maritime disputes, and clearer, more calibrated bottom-line statements on alliance commitments and core interests.³ While many of these initiatives make eminent sense, they generally fail to address both the underlying problem of clashing assumptions and beliefs about the requirements for continued order and prosperity in Asia and the basic threat perceptions generated by inaccurate historical analogies about China's past and domestic nationalist views and pressures. Moreover, almost no observers offer recommendations designed to significantly alter the power structure in volatile areas along China's maritime periphery, such as on the Korean Peninsula and in and around Taiwan, in ways that could significantly defuse those areas as sources of conflict over the long term.

In order to minimize the potential instabilities inherent in a roughly equal balance-of-power environment, specific actions must be taken to reduce the volatility of the most likely sources of future U.S.-China crises and the propensity to test each

side's resolve, and to enhance the opportunities for meaningful cooperation over the long term. In particular, Washington and Beijing will need to reach reliable understandings regarding the future long-term status of the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, the management of maritime territorial disputes, and the scope and function of U.S. (and other foreign) military activities within the first island chain—or at the very least within both China's and Japan's exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Such understandings should almost certainly involve some credible form of neutralization of these areas as locations from which to project U.S. or Chinese power, or the creation of a stable U.S.-China balance of power within them, thereby creating a de facto buffer zone along China's maritime periphery.

In the case of Korea, this implies the emergence of a unified, nonaligned (or loosely aligned) peninsula free from foreign military forces. This would require prior credible security assurances by both the United States and China that a unified Korea would remain free from coercion and always open to close economic and political relations with both countries. Such assurances might involve a continuation in some form of a greatly reduced security relationship with Washington, at least in the short to medium term. This process might also require Japan to provide security assurances to a unified Korea, at least to the extent of agreeing to not acquire nuclear weapons or some types of conventional weapons that Korea might find threatening, such as precision ballistic and cruise missile strike capabilities. Of course, none of this could happen as long as the Korean Peninsula remains divided, with South Korea under threat of attack from North Korea. Thus, ideally, the development of a stable balance of power in the Western Pacific will require Korean unification sooner rather than later. Failing that, a clear, credible understanding must be reached as soon as possible among the powers concerned regarding the eventual disposition of the Korea problem.

In the case of Taiwan, any credible neutralization of the cross-strait issue as a threat to either side's interests would require, as a first step, a U.S.-China understanding regarding restrictions on U.S. arms sales in return for certain types of verifiable limits on Chinese military production and deployments relevant to the island, such as ballistic missiles and strike aircraft. Beijing would also likely need to provide credible assurances that it would not use force against Taiwan in

any conceivable contingency short of an outright Taiwanese declaration of de jure independence or the U.S. placement of forces on the island. In the past, Beijing has resisted providing assurances regarding any non-use of force toward the island, viewing such an assurance as a limit on Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. However, as in the case of Korea, Beijing would likely view such a conditional limitation on its right to employ force as acceptable if viewed as a requirement for the creation of an overall stable balance of power in the Western Pacific; Chinese leaders might also regard it as a step toward the eventual unification of the island with the mainland. In addition, Beijing would also likely need to accept: a) explicitly that such unification could only occur on the basis of a peaceful process involving the willing consent of the people of Taiwan, and b) tacitly that eventual unification would likely not occur, if at all, for many decades. For its part, the United States would likely need to provide assurances to China that it would neither place forces on the island nor provide any new level of defense assistance to Taipei, as long as Beijing abides by its own assurances. And both countries would need to consult closely with Taiwan and Japan at each step of this process and provide clear and credible assurances regarding the understanding reached between them.

Regarding territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea, the United States needs to make clear that it has little if any direct interest in the interactions occurring between the disputants, beyond clear security threats leveled against the two U.S. allies involved: Japan and the Philippines. While supporting, in an even-handed manner, a binding code of conduct and established legal procedures for resolving clashes and arbitrating claims, Washington should avoid staking its credibility on ensuring that a noncoercive process is followed in every instance. That said, it should also make clear that it will oppose, forcefully if necessary, any attempt to establish an exclusion zone or de facto territorial waters beyond accepted 12-nautical-mile limits. For its part, Beijing must clearly affirm, through its words and actions, that there is no military solution to these disputes and that it will never seek to dislodge rivals forcefully from occupied areas. It must also credibly and convincingly state, privately if not publicly, that those waters in the South China Sea located within its so-called nine-dashed line and outside the territorial waters and EEZs of specified land features constitute

open ocean. Although doubtless difficult to achieve, such understandings will likely become more possible in the larger context of a neutralized first island chain as U.S.-China suspicions abate.

In the larger conventional military realm, U.S. military primacy within at least the first island chain will need to be replaced by a genuinely balanced force posture and accompanying military doctrine. This should likely be centered on what is termed a “mutual denial” operational concept in which both China and the United States along with its allies possess sufficient levels of anti-access and area denial (A2/AD)—type air, naval, missile, and space capabilities to make the risks and dangers of attempting to achieve a sustained advantage through military means over potentially volatile areas or zones clearly prohibitive. In such an environment, neither side would have the clear capacity to prevail in a conflict, but both sides would possess adequate defensive capacities to deter or severely complicate an attack, for example, on Taiwan, on the Chinese mainland, and against U.S./allied territory, or any effort to close or control key strategic lines of communication (SLOCs) in the Asia-Pacific. This will likely require agreed-upon restraints on the production and/or deployment of certain types of weapon systems operating in the Western Pacific, such as deep-strike stealth aircraft, ballistic and cruise missiles, and deployed surface and subsurface warships.

On the nuclear level, a stable balance-of-power environment in the Western Pacific requires a clear set of mutual assurances designed to strengthen the deterrence capacity of each side’s nuclear arsenal and thereby reduce significantly the dangers of escalation from a conventional crisis or conflict into a nuclear confrontation. To attain this goal, American and allied defense analysts need to discard the dangerous notion that U.S. primacy must extend to the nuclear realm, via the establishment of a clear ability to neutralize China’s nuclear arsenal. Instead, Washington should authoritatively indicate that it accepts and will not threaten China’s retaliatory nuclear strike capability. In other words, it must unambiguously affirm the validity of a U.S.-China nuclear balance based on a concept of mutual deterrence, something it has never done. Moreover, to make this credible, Washington must abandon consideration of a long-range, precision global strike system, or any other new type of system capable of destroying China’s

nuclear arsenal through both nuclear and conventional means, and provide greater assurances that its ballistic missile defense capabilities cannot eliminate a Chinese second strike. For its part, Beijing must be willing to accept such U.S. assurances and eschew any attempt to transition beyond its existing modest minimal deterrent, second-strike nuclear capability to a much larger force.

Obviously, these sorts of changes will present major implications for U.S. allies and friends in the region. Japan in particular would play a major role in any effort to create a stable U.S.-China balance of power in the Western Pacific. In order for Tokyo to provide Seoul with the kind of assurances identified above, and to accept the above adjustments in the U.S. force posture and stance toward Taiwan, certain clear understandings with Washington and Beijing would be necessary. In general, the creation of a *de facto* buffer zone or a neutral/balanced area within the first island chain would almost certainly require that Japan significantly strengthen its defense capabilities, either autonomously or, more preferably from the U.S. perspective, within the context of a more robust yet still limited U.S.-Japan security alliance. In the latter case, Tokyo would become a critical partner in the creation of the sort of defensive, mutual denial operational concept. This would entail the creation of a more fully integrated U.S.-Japan C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) infrastructure, stronger passive defenses against possible Chinese ballistic and cruise missile threats to U.S. and Japanese military assets, and enhanced Japanese logistics and support facilities, alongside improvements in specific defensive-oriented Japanese military capabilities, such as ASW (antisubmarine warfare) and interceptor aircraft. However, this would not require Japan to become a fully normalized security partner alongside the United States, undertaking alliance-based security activities across the Western Pacific and beyond.

For China, acceptance of a strengthened but still limited U.S.-Japan alliance, a unified, largely nonaligned Korean Peninsula, verifiable limits on Chinese capabilities vis-à-vis Taiwan, and the other elements of the stable balance-of-power structure mentioned above would require a clear willingness to forgo those more ambitious security objectives toward which some Chinese might aspire, either now or in the future. These

include, most notably, the clear ability to establish control over the waters and airspace along China's maritime periphery and a Sino-centric Asian economic and political order that largely excludes the United States. This will likely require, in turn, that Beijing make concerted, public efforts to reject and invalidate among the Chinese citizenry those more extreme interpretations of Chinese nationalism that call for China to dominate Asia and to employ aggressive or violent means to resolve various sovereignty and other disputes with its neighbors. Although not mainstream at present, such notions nonetheless could become more popular and influential as China's power grows (and if Washington responds to such growth by seeking to sustain its past predominance), and would in turn represent a clear threat to regional stability. The benefits for China of these accommodations would be an enhanced level of security via a reduced U.S. threat to vital Chinese interests and the avoidance of a costly and likely increasingly dangerous security competition. These new circumstances would also allow China to concentrate even more than at present on establishing a stable and prosperous domestic environment.

OBSTACLES TO ESTABLISHING A STABLE BALANCE IN ASIA

Several obstacles stand in the way of Washington and Beijing undertaking such a substantial change in perceptions and practices, force deployments, and power relations in the Western Pacific.

On the U.S. side, first and foremost is the general refusal of most if not all U.S. decisionmakers and officials to contemplate an alternative to U.S. military predominance in this vital region. Such maritime predominance has arguably served Washington and most of the region well for many decades, and it accords with the deep-seated notion of American exceptionalism, which prescribes a dominant U.S. leadership role throughout the world. In addition, the short-term perspective, natural inertia, and risk avoidance of bureaucrats and policy communities in Washington (and elsewhere) militate against major shifts in policy and approach, especially in the absence of an urgent and palpable need for change. Indeed, it is extremely difficult for any major power, much less a

superpower, to begin a fundamental strategic shift in anticipation of diminished relative capabilities before that diminishment fully reveals itself.

In the Western Pacific in particular, with regard to both U.S. ISR activities along the Chinese coast and the larger U.S. military presence within the first island chain, the United States Navy and many U.S. decisionmakers are wedded to the notion that American power (and in particular naval power) must brook no limitation in areas beyond a nation's 12-nautical-mile territorial waters and airspace. This derives in part from the belief that any constraints on U.S. naval operations will lead to a cascade of coastal states challenging the principle of U.S. maritime freedom of action and to possible reductions in the level of resources and the scope of operations available to support U.S. naval power. Moreover, the specific U.S. desire to maintain a strong naval presence along China's maritime periphery reflects a perceived need to acquire more accurate intelligence regarding Beijing's growing offshore air and naval capabilities. Such a presence is also viewed as essential to sustaining U.S. credibility with Asian allies such as Japan and the Philippines, and to the maintenance of deterrent capabilities against a possible Chinese attack on Taiwan. This combination of service interests, intelligence needs, and perceived security requirements reinforces the general U.S. bias in favor of continued maritime predominance. However, an inevitable Chinese refusal to accept that predominance over the long term will be expressed first and foremost in opposition to the past level of U.S. naval activities along the Chinese coastline, that is, within China's EEZ at the very least, and possibly within the entire first island chain.

Second, and closely related to the prior point, U.S. decisionmakers are extremely loath to contemplate significant adjustments in the current status of the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan. From the U.S. perspective, any movement toward a reduction in or even a significant modification of the U.S. security commitment to these two actors (a U.S. military ally and a de facto U.S. protectorate, respectively) could result in either moving to acquire nuclear arms, and/or threats or attacks from North Korea or China. In addition, Japan might react to such movement by questioning Washington's basic

security commitment to Tokyo, which could result in a break in the U.S.-Japan alliance and/or Japanese acquisition of nuclear arms. These concerns are real, if no doubt exaggerated by some in Tokyo or Taipei in order to justify maintenance of the existing U.S. relationship, and in some cases to avoid undertaking costly defense improvements of their own.

On the Chinese side, perhaps the most significant obstacle to undertaking a transition toward a stable balance of power in Asia derives from the insecurities and weaknesses of the Chinese government, both domestically and abroad. China's leaders rely, for their legitimacy and support, not only on continued economic success and rising living standards, but also on a form of nationalism that prizes the ability of the regime to correct past injustices meted out by "imperialist" powers during China's so-called "century of humiliation" and to stand up to current slights, both real and imagined. Thus, their policies often capitalize on the resentments felt by many Chinese citizens toward the supposedly arrogant West and Japan.

This viewpoint makes the Chinese leadership hesitant to quell the more extreme forms of nationalism described above and deeply suspicious of the United States and its allies. It also makes it more receptive to the notion that a rising yet still underdeveloped and relatively weak China must continue to conceal its military capabilities while developing its overall capacities to the maximum extent possible. In other words, the Chinese regime is both excessively vulnerable to ultra-nationalist pressures and disinclined to contemplate self-imposed limitations on its sovereign rights (for example, with regard to Taiwan) and its political, economic, and military abilities, especially in Asia. While this does not translate into a drive for predominance, it does make Beijing less willing to accept the kind of mutual restraints necessary to achieve a stable balance of power in the Western Pacific.

NO GRAND BARGAIN, BUT A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING AND A STAGED PROCESS ARE REQUIRED

These obstacles clearly indicate that Washington and Beijing are not about to undertake, much less reach, a formal

grand-bargain-type of agreement to establish a new regional security environment anytime soon.⁴ Such a fundamental shift in policies and approaches can only occur gradually, in stages, and over an extended period of time. But it can only begin if elites in Washington, Beijing, and other Asian capitals seriously examine the enduring trends under way in Asia and accept the reality of the changing power distribution and the need for more than just marginal adjustments and assurances. Only then will they undertake a systematic examination of the requirements of a stable balance of power over the long term, involving a serious consideration of the more fundamental actions. Such an examination and acceptance must initially occur domestically, then among allies and protectorates, and finally via a bilateral U.S.-China strategic dialogue aimed at developing understandings about the process and actions required. Such understandings must provide for ample opportunities and means for both sides to assess and evaluate the credibility and veracity of the actions of the other side.

If such understandings can be reached regarding the overall need for strategic adjustment, then the specific concessions to minimize potential instabilities and arrangements for meaningful cooperation, involving Korea, Taiwan, and maritime issues within the first island chain, will become much more possible. In particular, a strategic understanding designed to achieve a peaceful and stable transition to a genuine balance of power in the Western Pacific could make Beijing more likely to pressure or entice North Korea to abandon or place strong limits on its nuclear weapons program and undertake the kind of opening up and reforms that would almost certainly result eventually in a unified peninsula. While difficult to envision at present, such a shift in Chinese policy is certainly possible, given the obvious incentives to do so. While South Korea might also resist movement toward a nonaligned status in a post-unification environment, the obvious benefits that would result from a stable balance of power, if presented properly, could very likely overcome such resistance. Regarding Taiwan, if both U.S. and Chinese leaders can convince Taipei of the benefits of the kind of mutual assurances and restraints necessary to neutralize the cross-strait issue, none of which require the U.S. abandonment of the island, these possible adverse outcomes of the proposed or ongoing shift, including any resort to nuclear weapons, would almost certainly be avoided.

As for Japan and the U.S.-Japan alliance, in the past, many observers viewed a much-strengthened alliance and a stronger Japan as either a major provocation to Beijing not worth the cost or as a largely unfeasible option for Tokyo, given domestic political and economic constraints. However, as with the Taiwan and Korea cases, if viewed as a requirement for the creation of a buffer-like arrangement basic to a stable balance of power in the first island chain, and if limited in scope and purpose, such a calibrated strengthening would almost certainly prove acceptable to Beijing, and eventually necessary for Tokyo, particularly considering the unpalatable alternatives.

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula or technique that will guarantee or facilitate the transition to a new security environment based on a stable balance of power. It will require courageous and farsighted leadership in all relevant capitals, some significant risk taking (especially in the domestic political arena), and highly effective diplomacy. But the alternative, involving current attempts to sustain American predominance in the Western Pacific while muddling through by managing various frictions with Beijing in a piecemeal and incremental manner and cooperating where possible, will likely prove disastrous. And a much-delayed attempt to transition to a more stable balance, perhaps as a result of a clear failure of the existing strategy, will simply make the process more difficult.

Ultimately, the choice facing policymakers in the United States, China, and other Asian powers is whether to deal forthrightly and sensibly with the changing regional power

distribution or avoid the hard decisions that China's rise poses until the situation grows ever more polarized and dangerous. There are no other workable alternatives.

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NOTES

- 1 Michael K. Metcalf, *Imperialism With Chinese Characteristics? Reading and Re-reading China's 2006 Defense White Paper* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2013) 29.
- 2 Michael D. Swaine et al., *China's Military & the U.S.-Japan Alliance in 2030: A Strategic Net Assessment* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013) and Michael D. Swaine et al., *Conflict and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Strategic Net Assessment* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015).
- 3 For a recent, excellent example, see James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
- 4 Those few analysts, such as Hugh White, who recognize the changing power distribution in Asia, incorrectly identify China as seeking its own form of regional predominance and/or call for highly unrealistic means of addressing the overall problem, such as via a formal U.S. presidential declaration of the abandonment of American primacy and the establishment of a formal Concert of Europe-type agreement between Beijing, Washington, and other major Asian powers. See Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For an example of an argument in support of a bilateral grand bargain between Washington and Beijing, see Charles L. Glaser, "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice Between Military Competition and Accommodation," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (forthcoming).

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