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**Congressional Testimony**

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**ASIA'S DIPLOMATIC AND SECURITY  
STRUCTURE: PLANNING U.S.  
ENGAGEMENT**

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Thank you very much Mr. Chairman.

We are in a period of enormous transition in the Asia-Pacific, away from 70-plus years of American strategic clarity, economic strength and military predominance, to a much more unclear and potentially tumultuous period driven above all else by the changing power relationship between the United States (and its major allies, in particular Japan) and a continually rising China.

In confronting this uncertain environment, Beijing and Washington currently hold fundamentally different notions about the best means of preserving stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific over the long term:

The United States favors continued American maritime predominance and overall leadership. This includes the clear capacity to prevail in any potential conflict with China on issues that matter, extending at least up to China's 12 nm territorial waters. This viewpoint is expressed or implied in current and past U.S. National Security and Defense Strategies.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, Beijing favors at the very least something approaching a multipolar power structure, or at most a Sino-centric structure in which China enjoys a more secure region along its maritime periphery and is able to reject or resist any efforts to threaten its vital interests across the Asia-Pacific.

Those who call for either continued unambiguous American predominance or a far more assertive Chinese drive for dominance often base their arguments of the necessity for such action on faulty theoretical and historical factors or a misreading of current evidence.

Rising powers are not destined to seek hard-power dominance at all costs. And despite constant assertions by non-specialists, China is not historically predisposed to dominate the Asia-Pacific in hard-power terms. China's pre-modern imperial history provides a much more nuanced and mixed set of potential lessons in these areas.

More often than not, Beijing historically employed soft-power economic and diplomatic methods to deflect regional threats and ensure security while at times using military force to subjugate nearby adversaries. Also, it is important to keep in mind that pre-modern China was not a nation-state with clear and consistent boundaries, and that each Chinese dynasty adopted a different set of strategies to defend against external threats.

Looking forward, the notion that unequivocal U.S. or Chinese predominance in the Western Pacific constitutes the only basis for long-term regional stability and prosperity is a dangerous concept, for two basic reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSSFinal-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> and *The Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018), <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-StrategySummary.pdf>.

First, as long as China continues to grow and develop overseas interests, it will resist, in an increasingly determined fashion, U.S. efforts to sustain predominance by negating Beijing's efforts to project power along China's maritime periphery, viewing such efforts as a direct threat to its own security. The resulting intensifying security competition, already well underway (as reflected in the recently issued U.S. National Security Strategy), will further polarize the region, inject zero-sum calculations and fears into almost every U.S. or Chinese initiative, and generally force other Asian states to choose between Beijing and Washington on many issues, something they definitely do not want to do.

Second, it is far from clear that U.S. military predominance within the first and second island chains (i.e., out to approximately 1,500 miles from the Chinese mainland) can be sustained on a consistent basis over the long term, just as it is virtually impossible for China to establish its own predominance in that region. Changing relative economic capabilities, military capital stocks, and advances in military technologies all call such developments into question. Indeed, studies in recent years by Carnegie and the RAND Corporation have strongly suggested the difficulty of maintaining U.S. predominance in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, key U.S. Asian allies such as Japan and South Korea will very likely remain unwilling and/or unable to augment declining relative U.S. power in a major way, thus retaining U.S./allied predominance. Absent a major paradigm-shifting event or series of events, they will almost certainly lack the capacity and political commitment to boost their military and economic capabilities and alter their military doctrine sufficiently, and some allies could remain highly hesitant to stand in lockstep with Washington against China.

While a Chinese economic collapse would make moot the above conclusions, such a collapse is unlikely, and delaying any policy adjustments on either side in response to the shifting power distribution in Asia, in anticipation of such a collapse, will only make it more difficult to make stabilizing adjustments in the future. This is the case given both the long lead times required to make such adjustments, and the fact that mutual suspicions will likely have deepened by then, thus preventing the mutual accommodation necessary. We are well on the way to creating such deep suspicions, especially with the recent issuance of the highly zero-sum-oriented U.S. National Security and National Defense Strategies.

According to the above-mentioned Carnegie studies, even a relatively low-growth China will still almost certainly manage to greatly increase its economic and military capabilities in the Western Pacific relative to those of the United States and its allies, thus significantly building its presence and confidence in that region.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Swaine et al., *China's Military and the U.S.-Japan Alliance in 2030: A Strategic Net Assessment* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/05/03/china-s-military-and-u.s.-japan-alliance-in-2030-strategic-net-assessment-pub-51679>; 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); and Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power 1996-2007* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2015), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND\\_RR392.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND_RR392.pdf).

Indeed, in the absence of concerted stabilizing measures, the near-inevitable emergence of a clear level of Sino-U.S./allied parity in the Western Pacific will almost certainly increase the likelihood of crises and possibly even conflict over the handling of volatile issues such as Taiwan and maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. The primary danger is that: a) a rising China will over-estimate its growing leverage and opt for various forms of pressure or coercion that greatly alarm others; and b) the United States will overreact to such Chinese behavior, in an effort to compensate for its declining relative capabilities, thus raising the likelihood of conflict. Moreover, such crises will almost certainly occur regardless of the presence of superior U.S. power on a global level.

Given these considerations, the best optimal outcome for both nations is the development of a stable and cooperative balance of power in the Western Pacific, in which the most vital interests of both the U.S. and its allies and the Chinese are protected and neither side enjoys the clear capacity to dominate the other militarily within at least the first island chain.

Such a balance will require both greater confidence-building and crisis management measures (CBMs and CMMs) and mutual assurances and restraints, as well as efforts to reduce the volatility of the most likely sources of future U.S.-China crises in the Western Pacific. These include issues on the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, regional military intelligence and surveillance operations and other activities, and maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. This would amount to the creation of a de facto buffer zone along China's maritime periphery, involving its neutralization as a location from which to project either U.S. or Chinese power.

Specifically, such a buffer zone will likely require: a) a unified, nonaligned (or only loosely aligned) and hence largely neutralized Korean Peninsula; b) a militarily restrained Taiwan Strait environment; c) a more stable and predictable set of understandings regarding maritime territorial disputes; d) a common, defense-oriented, mutual denial military operational strategy and force structure within at least the first (and possibly the second) island chain (i.e., about 500-1500 nm from China's coastline); and e) more credible policies and assurances in support of a mutual deterrence nuclear force posture. These features of a stable balance are described in detail in the 2016 Carnegie report entitled *Creating a Stable Asia: An Agenda for a U.S.-China Balance of Power*.<sup>3</sup>

Many obstacles lie in the way of achieving a stable, cooperative balance of power in Asia, including:

- A U.S. refusal or inability to seriously contemplate an alternative to American predominance, for historical, bureaucratic and conceptual reasons; indeed, the most recent U.S. National Security and Defense Strategies rashly support a zero-sum approach to China supportive of such predominance.
- U.S. resistance to any significant change in the security environment and policies involving Korea, Taiwan, and maritime territorial disputes, fearing destabilizing allied reactions, ranging from Japanese remilitarization and nuclearization to a political and security shift toward China.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael D. Swaine with Wenyan Deng and Aube Rey Lescure, *Creating a Stable Asia: An Agenda for a U.S.-China Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP\\_Swaine\\_U.S.-Asia\\_Final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP_Swaine_U.S.-Asia_Final.pdf).

- Opposition by Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to such changes, in part due to a desire to avoid having to increase their own defense expenditures; each would prefer that the U.S. continue to serve as their security guarantor.
- A highly suspicious Chinese regime disinclined to contemplate any self-imposed limits on its sovereign rights and its rising political and military abilities, partly due to its excessive vulnerability to ultra-nationalist domestic pressures.

These problems suggest that a so-called Sino-American “Grand Bargain” to create an Asian balance of power is unlikely. The above understandings and force postures can only occur gradually, in stages, in a pragmatic, “test-and-adjust” manner, over a relatively long period (i.e., a decade or more). Two variations (i.e., a minimalist and maximalist version) of the process involved in creating a stable balance of power in the Western Pacific are presented in the above-mentioned 2016 Carnegie report.<sup>4</sup>

The first step in this process is for Washington, Beijing, and other major Asian powers to accept the reality of the changing power distribution in the Western Pacific and the need for more than marginal adjustments and limited CBMs. This recognition involves not only an acceptance of current and future power trends, but also an acknowledgement of the likely fact that “muddling through” and efforts to sustain or create U.S. or Chinese predominance, respectively, will produce more problems than transitioning to a balance of power.

But even under the best of conditions, this type of major adjustment will require courageous and far-sighted leadership, some risk taking, and a sustained level of highly effective diplomacy. None of these qualities are evident at present in either the United States or China.

Finally, it is important to state that the argument for the creation of a stable balance of power in the Western Pacific does not require deal making with China from a position of American weakness, as some will undoubtedly allege. It rests on the effective use of the United States’ substantial military and economic power, both globally and regionally, rather than on an attempt to make the best of a weak and diminishing position. It anticipates that the United States will remain the most powerful and influential nation in the world for many decades to come and that Washington, with the support of its allies and friends, can retain a leadership role in Asia—in many respects alongside Beijing—in a manner that is reassuring to all regional powers.

In other words, the process this argument presents for creating long-term stability and prosperity relies on American initiative and strength, not passivity and certainly not one-sided concessions. It also guards against possible Chinese misperceptions of American compromise and restraint as a sign of weakness of which to take advantage. Conditionality, reciprocity, and a willingness and an ability to suspend or reverse actions taken or contemplated are central to the process of building a stable balance over time.

While doubtless difficult to achieve, the creation of a stable balance of power in Asia will prove possible if viewed as the price that both sides would need to pay to avert an increasingly dangerous

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

and unpredictable regional security competition that neither side can win.