



Climate Change, Migration, and Nontraditional Security Threats in China

Complex Crisis Scenarios and Policy Options for China and the World

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Introduction and summary

A changing Pacific region

Climate change, migration, and sociopolitical conflicts associated with China's epic economic transformation over the past 35 years are coming to a head in this second decade of the 21st century. These interlaced dynamics are causing internal upheaval and regional instability in and around China, which could complicate or undermine efforts by the United States and Europe to coax China into full adherence to the post-Cold War international system. The consequences of these complex domestic crises—crises that have the potential to spill over China's borders—pose challenges for regional security, prosperity, and peace.

The Obama administration clearly understands what is at stake in the region. President Barack Obama, in a speech to the Australian Parliament in November 2011, described the United States as a Pacific nation, promising that his administration “will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future.”¹ As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted in her *Foreign Policy* article, “America's Pacific Century,” the United States devoted a vast amount of resources to the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters in the last decade, but the time has come to invest in the Asia-Pacific theater, a region that forecasts show will dominate the economic, political, and security decisions in the 21st century.²

More recently, in a programmatic speech on the Pacific pivot, Vice President Joe Biden insisted that the United States and its Pacific allies, especially Latin American countries, embrace a similar geographic outlook on the Pacific in order to secure an important strategic achievement—an increasingly democratic and unified region that “connected economically, strategically, and through common values can make a great contribution to a more prosperous and secure Pacific.”³

Taking these new steps to strengthen Asian bilateral security alliances, engage with regional multilateral institutions, expand trade and investment, and advance democracy and human rights is due in large part to the underlying environmental,

demographic, and nontraditional security problems that China is increasingly experiencing—all of them large factors in whether the Asia-Pacific region experiences regional stability and prosperity or encounters an economic slowdown, regional conflict, public dissent, and widespread humanitarian crises.

These are Chinese internal issues that are not easily influenced by the traditional diplomatic and development tools in the hands of policymakers outside of China. The country and its ruling Communist Party face serious problems that threaten its potential for sustained leadership—domestically, regionally, and internationally. The internal challenges of rapid urbanization, political corruption, labor scarcity, local governments' soaring debt, housing inflation, massive pollution, and a graying population loom large in China's path to sustained economic development and becoming a key regional stakeholder.

China and the United States—pivots of the Pacific Rim

The Pacific Rim is a primary center of global economic activity. The region exhibits incredible diversity—the economic depth of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore; the technological expertise of Japan, South Korea, and the United States; the natural resources of Australia, Colombia, Canada, Mexico, the Philippines, Russia, and the United States; the human resources of China and Indonesia; as well as the agricultural productivity of Australia, Chile, New Zealand, and others. A few data points illustrate the scope of this region's prevalence: The 21 members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum account for approximately 39 percent of the world's population, approximately 55 percent of world's gross domestic product, or GDP, and about 44 percent of world trade.⁴

The United States and China will increasingly serve as the key pivot points of the Pacific Rim, meaning the two nations will be both strategic partners and competitors, which in turn will require a stable bilateral relationship in order to be constructive. Yet these ties have been strained in recent years as China assertively pushes territorial claims against its neighbors, including two U.S. treaty allies—the Philippines and Japan, but also South Korea and Taiwan—while complaining that the

recent U.S. rebalance in the region seems to be the beginning of a de facto containment strategy against it.

Exacerbating these conflicts are the climate change, migration, and ensuing internal conflicts within China that are the subject of this report. Considering these developments, the United States and its European partners will have to adapt defense and development policies to this new environment while coping with domestic budget cuts. Getting this right is crucial if the United States is to remain the primary Pacific power while Europe must get a handle on its continuing fiscal crisis, which threatens funding for international involvement and the formulation of forward-looking global engagement strategies.

China, of course, must also adapt to its new role as a pivotal power along the Pacific Rim—a role that increasingly means dealing with the challenges of climate change, migration, and conflict within its own borders and working with its neighbors constructively, not confrontationally. The main pages of this report examine those challenges and offer ways for the United States, Europe, and China's neighbors to constructively influence China's decisions.

Moreover, public outcry against polluting factories and power plants in their backyards alongside the stress from internal migratory movements and the fallout from land seizures for infrastructure development only exacerbate the many environmental, social, and economic challenges China faces. This nexus of climate change, migration, and insecurity could potentially undermine the political legitimacy of the ruling party, curb economic growth, and threaten the government's ability to provide basic public services. The government's capacity to offer reliable public goods such as electrical power provision, flood control, and drought relief are inextricably linked with the regime's legitimacy, with major implications for domestic security.

The leaders in Beijing know the threats they face. There are top-level policies in place that attempt to address carbon emissions and energy inefficiencies, combat pollution and resource scarcity, rebalance migration and the rural-urban socioeconomic divide, and improve overall social welfare. However, the implementation of these policies are fragmented across free-standing, separate bureaucracies, without linkage to other climate security policies with which they interact. If the central government does not adopt climate security policies that are implemented at all levels of government—provincial and local as well—then the country's economic and political future is at stake.

China's regional influence and the Asia-Pacific region's safety and prosperity are dependent on addressing the intersecting consequences of climate change, migration, and social instability in China. Already, pressures from migration-driven urban sprawl, pollution, and rising energy demand within China are leading some Chinese policymakers to champion a “going out” strategy to diversify the nation's sources of energy, with ramifications in the South China Sea, East Sea, and beyond. And efforts to develop more hydroelectric energy and cope with rising water demand within China means that China's neighbors in South and Southeast Asia may well see less and less water flowing from the Himalayan Mountains into their nations.

Both of these sets of possible conflict along China's borders are real and growing. In this report, we examine in detail these climate change, migration, and insecurity trends at the national level within China and at different climate migration hotspots within the country, as well as their impact on domestic and regional policies. We then examine the implications for policymakers in the United States and China.

Briefly, however, our findings indicate that China's leadership is making progress on its own terms in addressing individual aspects of the climate change and migration challenges it has encountered, yet the lack of a comprehensive strategy means the country simply cannot tackle the array of problems it now faces. This in turn means that we can expect serious crises in the five climate migration hotspots we identify in this report, leading to serious political and economic complications for China, its neighbors, and the world.

But the complex crisis scenarios we map out in this report also offer possible solutions that China's leadership as well as policymakers in the United States, Europe, and around the Pacific Rim should consider. Crisis and conflict is not inevitable due to the foreseeable impact of climate change in China if policy collaboration can be promoted and then taken seriously. Bilateral and multilateral institutions and protocols focused on climate change are in place as starting points. We suggest further strengthening of these cooperative and collaborative ties in the final pages of this report—steps that will not be easy to negotiate either within China or between China and other nations but steps that simply must be taken to preserve the peace and prosperity enjoyed by Pacific Rim nations since the end of the Cold War.

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