

Center for American Progress



Exploring the Frontiers of U.S.-China Strategic Cooperation:

# **Roles and Responsibilities Beyond the Asia-Pacific Region**

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Edited by Melanie Hart November 2014

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Strategic Cooperation:

# **Roles and Responsibilities Beyond the Asia-Pacific Region**

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# Introduction: Shifting Power Balance is Raising New Questions About U.S. and Chinese Roles and Responsibilities Beyond the Asia-Pacific

China's rise presents new opportunities for the United States and China to work together and leverage the comparative advantages of two great nations to jointly combat global challenges. The United States and China are already working together to provide maritime security in the Gulf of Aden, for example, an important global shipping channel where piracy is a common problem. Chinese naval warships are actively patrolling pirate-infested waters to protect civilian traffic, and the Chinese navy is engaging in unprecedented operational coordination with the United States and other nations that deploy ships to the region. In 2013, for example, the U.S. and Chinese navies conducted joint counter-piracy drills that included landing a U.S. navy helicopter on a Chinese destroyer and a Chinese helicopter on a U.S. destroyer—an exchange that required deep military-to-military operational coordination. From a U.S. perspective, China's growing role in Gulf of Aden counter-piracy operations is an ideal example of how a rising China can take on new responsibilities to support common security objectives around the world.

When U.S. and Chinese leaders try to move from limited operational cooperation in one area to mutual dependence on issues that either side considers to be a critical national interest, however, the situation begins to unravel. At a fundamental level, U.S. and Chinese leaders still have very different views about what their respective roles and responsibilities should be in the global community. They also have fundamentally different interests on many global issues, and that limits the degree to which these nations are willing to depend on one another. When critical national interest are at stake, instead of engaging in true partnership, U.S. and Chinese leaders generally follow a “cooperate in some areas but hedge in others” approach: even when they are working closely together on a common problem, both sides also take measures to prepare for a potential double-cross. The result is that both nations spend more resources than they would if they could work together as true strategic partners.

China's rise is making this “cooperate but hedge” approach increasingly difficult to maintain, because as China grows in power and influence, it has new incentives and opportunities to hedge in big ways that can then become a growing concern for the United States. For example, as China's economy grows, the nation is becoming

increasingly dependent on imported oil from the Middle East, and that gives Chinese leaders a dual incentive to deepen regional security cooperation with the United States while simultaneously strengthening ties with Iran, Sudan, and other oil-producing nations that the United States views as adversaries. From a Chinese perspective, trade relationships with U.S. adversaries—such as Iran—are a useful hedge to ensure that China will have steady access to at least some oil supplies in the event of a future U.S.-China conflict. From a U.S. perspective, those relationships make it difficult to achieve critical Middle East security goals.

The United States and China would both benefit from opportunities to cooperate more and hedge less. To move in that direction, the first step is to clarify the suspicions that drive hedging behavior on both sides and think creatively about how those suspicions might be overcome. In October 2014, the Center for American Progress convened a group of rising U.S. and Chinese scholars to discuss these and other difficult issues in the bilateral relationship. This essay collection presents the views of the security experts who led this portion of the dialogue. For more detail on critical themes that emerged from the October 2014 closed-door track II discussions, see “Expanding the Frontier of U.S.-China Strategic Cooperation Will Require New Thinking on Both Sides of the Pacific.”

**Abraham Denmark**, vice president for political and security affairs at the National Bureau of Asian Research, begins this essay collection by examining how U.S. and Chinese conceptions of global order diverge and how that divergence creates friction in the U.S.-China relationship. After WWII, the United States played a leading role in establishing a rule-based international system that has proven profoundly successful at reducing major power conflicts and enabling cross-border trade and investment. That system made it possible for China to focus inward on economic growth—instead of worrying about external security threats—to become the global power it is today. As China becomes more integrated with and therefore more dependent on this global system, Chinese leaders are growing increasingly concerned that the United States could leverage its dominant position in the global order to undermine or constrain China. Chinese leaders are therefore exploring options for reducing U.S. power and influence, starting with the Asia-Pacific region. Abraham sees this new trend as a potentially serious threat to U.S. interests in the region and to the U.S.-China relationship more broadly.

**WANG Yiwei**, professor and director of the International Affairs Institute at Renmin University, argues that the real problem is a U.S. tendency to not only dominate the global order but to use “serving the global commons” as an excuse to take actions around the world that further U.S. domestic interests at the expense of other nations.



He argues that as China rises and becomes more integrated with and dependent on the global system, Chinese leaders should recognize that they cannot depend on the United States to maintain and operate global systems in a fair and impartial way. He argues that no individual nation can legitimately act for the global common good—including the United States—so a representative forum such as the United Nations should make decisions related to global or regional communities. He would like to see the global community shift toward more collaborative models, particularly on emerging issues such as maritime sovereignty, cybersecurity, and cooperation in outer space.

**Kathleen Walsh**, associate professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College, examines China's blue economy—meaning China's marine, maritime, and naval sector—ambitions and argues that China's new maritime development programs could have a big impact on the United States and other nations. Chinese leaders are looking at water resources—including coastal areas, rivers, lakes, and oceans—as the nation's next economic development frontier. China's growing technology capabilities are extending its civil and military reach into maritime areas around the world and making it possible to develop new industries ranging from fishing to shipbuilding. Chinese leaders want to maximize these new economic opportunities while simultaneously ramping up environmental protection and conservation efforts to make sure the nation's blue economy activities have a positive rather than a negative environmental impact. China's success or failure on the environmental side of this equation will have big implications for global maritime resources and China's image as a responsible—or irresponsible—global power. Kathleen advises U.S. and Chinese leaders to establish a U.S.-China blue economy advisory council and subnational partnerships to support blue economy environmental efforts in both nations.

ZHAO Minghao, Scott Harold, and GAO Shangtao focus on the Middle East and examine U.S.-China opportunities and challenges in the region. **ZHAO Minghao**, research fellow at the China Center for Contemporary World Studies, argues that the current situation in Afghanistan presents an ideal opportunity for China and the United States to establish a new type of major power relations. Minghao points out that although some observers may assume Afghanistan is primarily a U.S. problem, China shares a border with Afghanistan and could easily find itself on the front lines for terrorist attacks if stability breaks down after the U.S. troop withdrawal. Minghao argues that the U.S. drawdown strategy in Afghanistan faces major obstacles—some related to U.S. political problems at home, others to the regional environment—but China has much to gain if the United States succeeds, much to lose if the United States fails, and a strong incentive to contribute what it can to push the needle toward success. He recommends that U.S. and Chinese leaders ramp up cooperation on

areas such as sharing intelligence about regional terrorist groups, coordinating support for Afghan economic reconstruction, and working together to further integrate Afghanistan into regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

**Scott Harold**, full political scientist at the RAND Corporation, examines the triangular relationship between the United States, China, and Iran and questions why Chinese leaders do not view U.S.-China cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation in Iranian as an ideal opportunity to operationalize President Xi Jinping's new-model relations concept. Scott argues that the United States and China do share a common interest in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, but China also feels the need to hedge against U.S. influence over other nations in the region, and China's suspicions of U.S. intentions are deep enough to make hedging the more important objective from a Chinese perspective. China therefore tried to continue purchasing Iranian oil supplies despite U.S. sanctions against Iran, and China held naval exercises with Iran at a critical point in the P5+1 nuclear negotiations. Scott suggests that the fundamental lack of strategic trust between the United States and China will limit near-term opportunities and cooperation on the Iran issue.

**GAO Shangtao**, associate professor at the China Foreign Affairs University Institute for International Relations, examines U.S. foreign policy decisions in the recent and ongoing Syrian humanitarian crisis. Shangtao uses the Syrian case to demonstrate that the United States is unlikely to deploy its military to intervene in a global crisis unless U.S. citizens or other core U.S. interests are under a direct threat. Although the United States often claims to act in the defense of global principles such as democracy and human rights, Shangtao argues that domestic interests are often the real factor driving U.S. foreign policy decisions. He recommends that the United States stop criticizing China for acting on behalf of its own national interests in the region, and he recommends that China think carefully about the degree to which it should depend on the United States to provide stability. Shangtao recommends that China and the United States find more opportunities to work together in the Middle East in ways that protect the national interests of both nations and the broader global community.

The October 2014 Center for American Progress U.S.-China dialogue also covered energy, climate, and regional security challenges. For essay collections on those topics, see:

- Exploring the Frontiers of U.S.-China Strategic Cooperation: Energy and Climate Change
- Exploring the Frontiers of U.S.-China Strategic Cooperation: Visions for Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

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