



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

Visions for Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

Edited by Melanie Hart

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Introduction: United States and China Have Different Visions for the Asia-Pacific Regional Security Order

Regional security issues loom large in the U.S.-China relationship. The Asia-Pacific region is a hot zone of security challenges, and the United States and China play a role in all of them. The two nations sometimes have different views about how those challenges should be managed and what the respective roles and responsibilities should be. That can lead to bilateral tension, which can also spill over to undermine other, more cooperative areas of the bilateral relationship.

In October 2014, the Center for American Progress convened a group of U.S. and Chinese foreign policy experts to discuss these and other difficult issues in the bilateral relationship. This report includes essays from the Asia-Pacific regional security portion of that dialogue. For more detail on critical themes that emerged during the October 2014 closed-door discussions, see “Expanding the Frontier of U.S.-China Strategic Cooperation Will Require New Thinking on Both Sides of the Pacific.”

These essays highlight some of the most important security challenges the United States and China are facing in the Asia-Pacific region. These essays also offer suggestions for how the two sides can work together to manage sensitive issues today and begin building a more sustainable regional security order for the future.

One of the key themes that emerged from the October conference discussions is the fact that communication is sometimes the biggest stumbling block. U.S. and Chinese leaders come from very different political systems with different historical and cultural contexts. **Sheena Chestnut Greitens**, assistant professor at the University of Missouri and nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, begins this essay collection by identifying core elements of U.S. messaging that send inaccurate or confused signals to Chinese observers about U.S. intentions in the region. She points out, for example, that Chinese observers view the “Thucydides’ trap” metaphor as a lesson about alliances that Americans do not similarly emphasize. Similarly, Chinese observers interpret the U.S. Asia-Pacific rebalance as an effort to balance against China’s rise and contain China, which is not the stated intention of U.S. policymakers who use the term as a financial met-

aphor for global asset reallocation. Clarifying the intentions behind U.S. strategy and the metaphors used to frame it could help dial down China's suspicion of the United States and manage opposition to some of its key policies in the region.

In their respective essays **LIU Feitao**, deputy director for American Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, and **William Norris**, assistant professor at Texas A&M University Bush School of Government and Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, point out that despite recent advances in military-to-military relations, this area remains one of the most fragile links in the U.S.-China bilateral relationship and that fragility is fast becoming a major strategic risk in the Asia-Pacific region. With so many potential flash-points in the region, it is becoming increasingly critical to create a broader array of routine cooperation channels similar to those for energy and climate cooperation. Feitao and William offer concrete suggestions, including elevating the strategic security dialogue to make military-to-military interaction an official third leg of the strategic and economic dialogue, or S&ED, and involving the Chinese navy in multilateral efforts to secure regional sea lanes of communication, or SLOCs.

ZHA Wen and Ely Ratner examine third-party relationships between the United States, China, and Southeast Asian nations. **ZHA Wen**, assistant professor at China Foreign Affairs University, points out that many Chinese observers view U.S. alliance relationships in Southeast Asia as a destabilizing factor, and the Chinese security community is debating how their nation should respond. China has traditionally used economic ties to dampen conflicts with neighboring countries, but recent challenges with the Philippines are triggering doubt in Beijing over whether economic leverage is enough to address provocative behavior from U.S. allies. Some Chinese scholars believe China needs to up the ante and use its military might to counteract that behavior. Wen compares China's economic relationships with the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam and finds that punitive economic measures can be effective, but only in cases where the counterpart nation's economy is significantly dependent on China. The Philippines case, for example, shows the limits to what China can accomplish through economic ties alone. In third-party challenges where that dependence does not exist, she advises China and the United States to enhance cooperation and use diplomatic measures to dial down security tension.

They are more likely to see U.S. alliances as crucial to maintaining regional stability and instead express concerns about Chinese behavior in the maritime domain. **Ely Ratner**, senior fellow and deputy director for Asia-Pacific Security at the Center for a New American Security, argues that in recent years, China has

become not only more assertive but has also been increasingly engaging in unilateral coercion to advance its claims in the South China Sea. He points out that during President Barack Obama's first term, Chinese leaders generally framed their assertiveness as necessary responses to the provocations of other nations. More recently, however, Chinese coercion has been unprovoked and Chinese officials are framing their actions to revise the prevailing territorial status quo as a response to what they view as the injustices of the past 30 years. In Ely's view, China's shift toward proactively and unilaterally attempting to redraw regional boundaries is inherently destabilizing and already starting to trigger counterbalancing actions from countries throughout the region. He encourages the United States to work with China to find off-ramps away from its current revisionist path.

WANG Fan, vice president at China Foreign Affairs University, concludes this essay collection by examining U.S.-China differences and opportunities for cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. Washington and Beijing have a common interest in North Korean denuclearization, but U.S. and Chinese leaders tend to disagree about how to effectively reach that goal. In Fan's view, the United States wants to use military coercion to force the North Koreans to abandon their weapon's program. But he sees a coercive approach as more likely to feed North Korea's existing security fears and trigger conflict escalation rather than de-escalation. Instead, he recommends that the United States work more collaboratively within the six-party framework to offer security protections to North Korea that will enable North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to shift his attention from national defense to economic growth. In Fan's view, the United States should apply the same logic to the North Korea issue that the Nixon administration applied to China decades ago—reach out to build new economic ties that will speed development and trust that as a nation grows economically, its interests will naturally become more in line with U.S. and other developed economies' interests.

The October 2014 Center for American Progress U.S.-China dialogue also covered energy, climate change, and global 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: Roles and Responsibilities beyond the Asia-Pacific Region

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