

A RESTRAINT APPROACH TO U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

REVERSING THE SLIDE TOWARD
CRISIS AND CONFLICT

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Executive Summary

A responsible U.S. restraint approach to relations with China represents the least dangerous, most potentially beneficial and mutually productive strategy compared to any of the alternatives, including the current “soft” containment approach and a much more hardline strategy explicitly designed to weaken China and undermine the PRC regime. The current “soft” containment approach is part of a larger dynamic driven by a near-total lack of strategic trust, worst-case, zero-sum threat assumptions about intentions, and deep, mutually exclusive political and ideological approaches.

A genuinely hostile Sino–U.S. relationship will at the very least undermine global stability, severely disrupt efforts to manage major common threats such as climate change, and increase greatly the chances of severe crises or even war between the two great powers.

Unless reversed or moderated significantly, this negative dynamic is likely, on balance, to produce a genuinely hostile Sino–U.S. relationship that will at the very least undermine global stability, severely disrupt efforts to manage major common threats such as climate change, and increase greatly the chances of severe crises or even war between the two great powers.

Our preferred Restraint strategy for Asia centers on replacing the intensifying Sino–U.S. security competition with a regional structure emphasizing bounded and clearly defined areas of competition and red lines, integrated and inclusive (to the maximum extent possible) economic and technological relations, positive-sum political and diplomatic exchanges, and genuinely coordinated, high-priority efforts to combat climate change

and other transnational threats. The ultimate success of this strategy will require persistent, long-term efforts to:

- End the harsh, zero-sum rhetoric that now dominates on both sides.
- Reduce greatly the current heavy reliance on military posturing and signaling in preserving stability.
- Clearly define and bound areas of bilateral competition.
- Stabilize the Taiwan situation and other potential political-military sources of conflict through a clearer understanding of red lines and a revitalization of the U.S. One China policy, and work toward their long-term neutralization as a potential source of intense rivalry between Washington and Beijing.
- Put in place a defensive, denial (not control)-oriented force posture in the Western Pacific.
- Redefine U.S. alliances in Asia not only to deter, but also to nurture expanding cooperative security measures and confidence-building measures (CBMs).
- Establish clear Sino-U.S. understandings to permit mutually productive economic and technological growth.
- Enhance America's overall economic and political attractiveness to Asia and the world, and its ability to compete and cooperate with China.

All of this likely requires a fundamental shift in the mindset of American (and Chinese) decision-makers regarding threats, opportunities, and paths to future stability and prosperity in Asia. This new mindset should stress climate change, positive-sum forms of bilateral competition, balance and inclusiveness over dominance or primacy, and the dropping of "great power competition" as a strategic frame.

Implementing such a strategy would involve a long-term process, initially including several low-risk, low-cost actions designed to moderate the Sino-U.S. rivalry (such as

forgoing provocative U.S. force posture moves in Japan and revitalizing the One China policy toward Taiwan) but continually building over time through reciprocal CBMs between Beijing and Washington.

Despite the above efforts, if the Sino–U.S. rivalry in Asia intensifies, and assuming China’s aggregate economic and military power continues to grow at a historically low rate of between 3 to 5 percent per annum, Washington will gradually need to adjust to the new power realities in order to best protect its vital interests while avoiding a great power war. This scenario points to sustained, deepening rivalry.

The United States should continue to seek cooperation with China on issues critical to its interests and that of the international system.

Such a scenario will necessitate a significant restructuring (in both “hard” and “soft” directions) of existing U.S. commitments and alliances in Asia, likely involving a pullback from those existing alliance commitments in Southeast Asia that would expose the United States to unnecessary dangers, and strengthening of the security of Japan and South Korea, alongside a reduction in U.S. ground forces on the Korean Peninsula. It would not involve a dangerous and futile U.S. effort to reestablish regional primacy. Any such adjustments in U.S. alliances would be phased in over several decades and require stabilizing reactions by U.S. allies, thereby minimizing risk to themselves and the region.

Even in this scenario of deepening rivalry, however, the United States should continue to seek cooperation with China on issues critical to its interests and that of the international system. These include Asian stability, nuclear stability, the environment, and global health. A thinner level of cooperation under rivalry is indeed possible, as was demonstrated by U.S.–Soviet understandings on non–proliferation and arms control during the Cold War.

Regarding the critically important issue of Taiwan, the U.S. should revitalize and sustain its One China policy under either the “best case” or “sustained rivalry” scenario of U.S.–China relations. Under the former scenario, an overall improvement in Sino–U.S. relations should facilitate a steady improvement of the Taiwan situation and a reduction in U.S. defense commitments to the island, commensurate with concrete positive actions by Beijing and Taipei.



President Joe Biden participates in a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Monday, November 14, 2022, at the Mulia Resort in Bali, Indonesia. (Official White House Photo by Cameron Smith).

Under the scenario of deepening Sino–U.S. rivalry and a militarily dominant China in the area around Taiwan, Washington should put in place a multi–faceted strategy designed to sustain its One China policy while permitting it to eventually end any intention to directly intervene militarily in a Taiwan–China conflict while doing all it can to reassure other Asian nations. Under such conditions U.S. intervention would almost certainly lead to a major war and quite possibly a defeat for the United States. If mishandled, such a

policy could cause some of these allies to acquire nuclear weapons or strike differing levels of accommodating political and security arrangements with Beijing that alarm the United States and other powers, thus precipitating further instability.

This shift away from direct military intervention in a cross–Strait Taiwan conflict would be accompanied by continued strong U.S. support for Taiwan in other areas (including the provision of military material to the island), and a stronger focus on the U.S.–Japan security alliance. Such a strategy will doubtless confront many challenges and will take many years to implement, but would be an advantage over a policy that would almost certainly end in a disastrous conflict with Beijing.¹

This paper first presents those general core restraint views regarding U.S. interests and the international system today and in the future that justify and support the above “best case” and “sustained rivalry” Restraint strategies. It is followed by a Restraint–based assessment of the challenges and opportunities that China poses for the United States, followed by a more detailed presentation of the features of the two alternate (but overlapping) strategies for two potential futures of the U.S.–China relationship. It ends with an assessment of the relative costs and benefits involved in implementing a responsible Restraint strategy toward China compared to more zero–sum, adversarial approaches.

¹ This balanced restraint strategy involving limits on both U.S. alliance commitments and the extent of U.S. military involvement in a possible future China–Taiwan conflict emerged through discussions among Michael Swaine, Sarang Shidore, Mike Mochizuki, and other Asia specialists.

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COVER PHOTO: President Joe Biden participates in a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Monday, November 14, 2022, at the Mulia Resort in Bali, Indonesia. (Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz).

Core Restraint Views

A Restraint approach to U.S.–China relations is founded upon and reflects several overall views and assumptions regarding both vital American national interests and policies and several key features of the international system.

Efforts to maintain U.S. global military primacy, whether emphasizing deterrence or active intervention, have most often produced a more dangerous, less stable world.

One core Restraint set of views is that the United States is unnecessarily over–extended in its military involvement across the globe, has an excessively broad definition of its vital interests, and too frequently relies on military over diplomatic means to defend those interests while seeking to maintain, to the maximum extent possible, economic and military dominance worldwide and to extend democracy to as many nations as possible.²

A second Restraint view that follows from the above is the notion that post–Cold War efforts to maintain U.S. global military primacy, whether emphasizing deterrence or active intervention, have most often produced a more dangerous, less stable world, thereby undermining the most vital U.S. interest of safeguarding the security and well–being of the American people.³

² Bacevich, Andrew J. *After the Apocalypse: America's Role in a World Transformed*. Metropolitan Books, 2021; Wertheim, Stephen. *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020; Walt, Stephen M. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. Macmillan, 2018; Posen, Barry R. *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. Cornell University Press, 2015; Shifrinson, Joshua. "Neo-Primacy and the Pitfalls of U.S. Strategy Toward China." *The Washington Quarterly* 43 No.4, 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1849993>.

³ Larison, Daniel. "In Defense of Restraint." *American Conservative*, July 16, 2020. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/in-defense-of-restraint/>; Jackson, Van. *Pacific Power Paradox: American Statecraft and the Fate of the Asian Peace*. Yale University Press, 2023.

The United States is physically very secure behind two oceans and with two friendly neighbors on its borders, and in any event has the capability, through nuclear weapons and a territory–based conventional power projection capability, to counter any direct or indirect military threats to its most vital interests. The definition of vital national interests should thus be limited to the defense and preservation of conditions directly necessary to the territorial integrity, security, and well–being of the American people and their way of life.

This primarily requires the ability to protect the nation against both direct and indirect, national, transnational, and subnational threats to such interests, and a stable global order open, as much as possible, to trade, investment, technological innovation, and people–to–people contacts. It also requires co–existence with countries with different political systems, congruent with a stable and open global order. Above all, it requires a strong and cohesive domestic political, economic, and social order. It does not require absolute security, the maintenance of a prominent global military presence, a reliance on frequent overseas military forays, or extensive, formal, often one–sided, security commitments to a wide range of other nations.

A third Restraint viewpoint stresses the fact that the international system within which the United States defends or advances its interests is no longer unipolar.⁴ The conditions that elevated the United States to the status of global hegemon after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 no longer exist and cannot be restored. The United States has no practical alternative but to accept the reality of an increasingly multipolar world and recognize that both continued U.S. dominance and world peace are illusions. For the foreseeable future, mutual coexistence, compromise, and balance among the great

⁴ Beebe, George. “Managed Competition: A U.S. Grand Strategy for a Multipolar World.” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2022.

<https://quincyst.org/report/managed-competition-a-u-s-grand-strategy-for-a-multipolar-world/>; Walt, Stephen. “America Is Too Scared of the Multipolar World.” *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2023.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/07/america-is-too-scared-of-the-multipolar-world/>; Shidore, Sarang. “Macron’s dissent: This is what multipolarity looks like.” *Responsible Statecraft*, April 13, 2023.

<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/04/13/macrons-dissent-this-is-what-multipolarity-looks-like/>;

Latham, Andrew. “Spheres of Influence In a Multipolar World.” *Defense Priorities*, 2022.

<https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/spheres-of-influence-in-a-multipolar-world>.

powers will have to suffice as an operative conception of “peace.”⁵ This concept thus rejects the use of distorting and dangerous, usually zero–sum ideological frameworks in understanding global politics, such as “democracy versus authoritarianism,” or a singular stress on “great power competition.”⁶

The Restraint view holds that, within this system, two existential or near–existential international threats endanger humankind above all else in the present century: first, the increased possibility of large–scale nuclear war (as a result of proliferation, new technologies, the erosion of arms control agreements, and deepening great power rivalries); and second, the largely unchecked worsening of the climate crisis as the preeminent expression of global environmental degradation.⁷

A third threat is primarily domestic and mostly affects democratic states, although it certainly also has international implications: the rise of extremely nationalist,

⁵ Jackson, Van. “The Problem With Primacy.” *Foreign Affairs*, January 16, 2023.
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/asia/problem-primacy>.

⁶ Weiss, Jessica Chen. “The China Trap.” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2022.
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-trap-us-foreign-policy-zero-sum-competition>; Brenes, Michael and Van Jackson. “Great-Power Competition Is Bad for Democracy.” *Foreign Affairs*, July 14, 2022.
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2022-07-14/great-power-competition-bad-democracy>; Heer, Paul. “U.S. and Chinese National Security Are Not Irreconcilable.” *The National Interest*. October 26, 2022.
<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/us-and-chinese-national-security-are-not-irreconcilable-205566>; Werner, Jake. “What Biden means when he says we’re fighting ‘global battle for democracy.’” *Responsible Statecraft*, March 31, 2023.
<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/03/31/what-biden-means-when-he-says-were-fighting-global-battle-for-democracy/>; Ashford, Emma. “Great-Power Competition Is a Recipe for Disaster.” *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2021.
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/01/china-usa-great-power-competition-recipe-for-disaster/>; Odell, Rachel Esplin. “Why it’s wrong for the US to label China a threat to the ‘world order.’” *Responsible Statecraft*, March 20, 2021.
<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/03/20/why-its-wrong-for-the-us-to-label-china-a-threat-to-the-world-order/>; Menon, Rajan. “How U.S.-China ‘Competition’ Could Lead Both Countries to Disaster.” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 2021.
<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-11-22/china-u-s-competition-war-biden-xi-summit>.

⁷ Goldstein, Lyle J. “The Trouble with Taiwan.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. March 13, 2023.
<https://thebulletin.org/premium/2023-03/the-trouble-with-taiwan/>; Rudd, Kevin. “Preventing a US–China Nuclear Arms Race.” Project Syndicate, December 4, 2021.
<https://www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/us-china-nuclear-arms-control-by-kevin-rudd-2021-12?barrier=accesspaylog>; Lieven, Anatol. “Climate Change: The Greatest National Security Threat to the United States.” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2021.
<https://quincyinst.org/report/climate-change-the-greatest-national-security-threat-to-the-united-states/>.

anti-democratic, race-based nativism and the political polarization and dysfunction it engenders.⁸

For Restraint advocates, these threats supersede any supposed global, value-based threats, including the commonly perceived inflated and distorted international struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, as well as narrower, conventional security or economic rivalries among non-nuclear powers.

In assessing the role of diplomacy (and other non-military forms of international engagement and conflict resolution) versus military force, despite the introduction of new technologies, Restrainers believe that military conflict remains fraught with risk, uncertainty, higher than expected costs, and the likelihood of unexpected consequences. This fact, along with the gradual emergence of a multipolar order and the frequent historical failures of U.S.-led attempts to invade, occupy, and remake distant nation-states, provide good reasons to prioritize diplomacy and economic or other forms of non-violent tools of statecraft over military intervention.⁹ While the political use of military capabilities is in many cases essential in the conduct of diplomacy, any actual use of force should be considered a last resort, employed only under extreme conditions, and in the defense of vital interests only.

⁸ Brenes and Jackson. "Great-Power Competition Is Bad for Democracy."; Kleinfeld, Rachel and John Dickas. *Resisting the Call of Nativism: What U.S. Political Parties Can Learn From Other Democracies*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/05/resisting-call-of-nativism-what-u.s.-political-parties-can-learn-from-other-democracies-pub-81204>; Jeung, Russell and Jessica J. Lee. "Rivalry Without Racism." *Foreign Affairs*, July 29, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-28/rivalry-without-racism>; Werner. "What Biden means when he says we're fighting 'global battle for democracy.'"

⁹ Ashford, Emma. "Strategies of Restraint," *Foreign Affairs*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/strategies-restraint>; Bacevich, Andrew. "The Endless Fantasy of American Power." *Foreign Affairs*, September 18, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-09-18/endless-fantasy-american-power>; Wertheim, Stephen. "The Price of Primacy." *Foreign Affairs*, February 10, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>; Ruger, William. "To Defend America, Don't Overreach." *The New York Times*, May 19, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/opinion/iraq-war-failed.html>; Friedman, Benjamin H. and Stephen Wertheim. "Say No, Joe." *Foreign Policy*, November 25, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/25/say-no-joe/>.



South China Sea (April 1, 2022) The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) transits the South China Sea. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication 3rd Class Thaddeus Berry).

The United States, as the dominant military and economic power on the planet, has developed and maintained the dangerous notion that only American global primacy and “leadership” can keep the world peaceful and ensure prosperity.¹⁰ Restrainers believe this idea has led the United States to engage frequently in a feckless misuse of military power, resulting in large part from inflated threats, overconfidence, and a deep belief in American exceptionalism. With the possible exception of Israel, no nation employs force as frequently. Moreover, many Americans remain strongly supportive of high levels of U.S. defense spending and Washington’s many global security alliances. However, many citizens are also growing weary of U.S. military interventions and the heavy reliance on military options in handling foreign problems.¹¹ Large numbers of Americans now favor

¹⁰ Wertheim. *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*.

¹¹ According to the Eurasia Group Foundation’s 2022 survey, a plurality of Americans want to decrease the number of U.S. troops stationed overseas and reduce security commitments. For instance, 45 percent of Americans would like to see U.S. troops in Asia reduced. The survey also shows that Americans are less concerned about spreading democracy abroad and more about protecting it at home. The “Wilsonian”

diplomacy over military force.¹² And some question the need for large numbers of overseas military bases around the world.¹³ This suggests popular support for a Restraint-oriented foreign policy, including reduced defense spending if and as security competitions with other great powers are reduced.

Compounding the problems caused by military intervention in the service of primacy is the emergence in the United States of deep levels of public uncertainty and insecurity about the future. The many factors underlying this feeling of uncertainty include a crisis of legitimacy involving widespread dissatisfaction with prevailing conceptions of freedom and democracy when viewed through the lens of race, gender, and sexuality, as well as egregious government ineptitude, fiscal irresponsibility, and persistent social problems.¹⁴

Politicians often exploit the worsening domestic situation by inflating the threats posed by undemocratic states like China to divert attention from their own responsibility for problems at home and to unify their political base.¹⁵ Domestic circumstances have also created a strong tendency toward an excessive level of economic protectionism which, in the absence of countervailing domestic policies, undermines growth and weakens

view that the United States has a moral obligation and an important national interest in spreading its values throughout the world has become far less popular over the years. Hannah, Mark, Caroline Gray, Zuri Linetsky, and Lucas Robinson. "Rethinking American Strength." Eurasia Group Foundation, 2022. <http://egfound.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2022-09-Rethinking-American-Strength.pdf>.

¹² Hannah, Gray, Linetsky, and Robinson. *Rethinking American Strength*.

¹³ Hannah, Gray, Linetsky, and Robinson. *Rethinking American Strength*.

¹⁴ "Seven in ten Americans say the country is in crisis, at risk of failing." Ipsos, January 3, 2022. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/seven-ten-americans-say-country-crisis-risk-failing>.

¹⁵ Heer, Paul. "Deconstructing the Bipartisan Consensus on the China Threat." *The National Interest*, March 16, 2023. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/deconstructing-bipartisan-consensus-china-threat-206315>;

Boot, Max. "Democrats and Republicans agree on China. That's a problem." *The Washington Post*, March 6, 2023;

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/06/republican-democrat-china-consensus-hysteria/>;

Zakaria, Fareed. "Washington has succumbed to dangerous groupthink on China." *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2023.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/02/china-hearings-bipartisan-hysteria/>.

incentives to cooperate with China and other nations in handling common global economic and financial threats.¹⁶

The United States, as the dominant military and economic power on the planet, has developed and maintained the dangerous notion that only American global primacy and “leadership” can keep the world peaceful and ensure prosperity.

Restrainers assert that this dynamic, along with a deeply-rooted commitment to sustaining high levels of defense spending and hundreds of overseas bases, are increasing the chance of conflict with non-democratic powers while undermining efforts to properly define, prioritize and deal with threats at home and abroad.¹⁷

Finally, many U.S. friends and allies have both the capacity and the need to do far more to provide for their own defense, thereby allowing the United States to significantly reduce its own global military posture. But Restraint does not encourage those countries to rapidly ramp up their defense spending. Deepening interdependence, the possibility of large-scale nuclear war, and the emergence of high priority common security threats such as climate change all argue in favor of efforts to reduce interstate security competition, which would lower the need for ever higher defense budgets, and enhance incentives for more cooperative forms of security.¹⁸

¹⁶ Canals, Clàudia. “The threat of protectionism in the global economy.” Caixa Bank, July 12, 2019. <https://www.caixabankresearch.com/en/economics-markets/activity-growth/threat-protectionism-global-economy>.

¹⁷ Walt. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*; Bacevich. *After the Apocalypse: America's Role in a World Transformed*; Ashford. “Strategies of Restraint.”

¹⁸ Quincy Institute. “Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia.” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2022. <https://quincyst.org/report/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/>; Thrall, Trevor, and Benjamin H. Friedman, “National Interests, Grand Strategy, and the Case for Restraint,” in Thrall and Friedman. *U.S. Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for Restraint*. Routledge, 2018; Edelstein David M. and Joshua Shifrinson. “It’s a Trap! Allies, Power Shifts, and

If successfully implemented, Restraint as a basis of policy vis-à-vis China will buy the United States time to repair its severely damaged domestic order and reallocate national security resources to concerns that pose a greater threat to the security and well-being of the American people than China. More broadly, it will facilitate the identification of clear red lines based on the protection of genuinely vital interests, the adoption of prudent and balanced approaches to contentious issues, and the opening of intellectual and political space allowing for greater dialogue, understanding, and compromise between Washington and Beijing.¹⁹ This will significantly reduce the chances of conflict.

The Urgent Need to Right-Size the China Threat

Multipolarity and the end of American dominance, rising domestic problems, looming, high-priority transnational threats, heavy levels of global economic and technological interdependence, and the resulting need to create a stable long-term basis for productive and peaceful coexistence together justify an array of Restraint-based U.S. policies toward Beijing. This must begin with a serious effort to right-size the threats and opportunities that China poses, both now and over time, to the international system,

Entrapment” in Thrall and Friedman. *U.S. Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for Restraint*; Shiffrinson, Joshua. “Time to Consolidate NATO?,” *The Washington Quarterly* 40 No. 1, 2017. 109–23; Bacevich, Andrew J. and Annelise Sheline. “The End of American Militarism?: Biden Must Confront Washington’s Addiction to Force.” *Foreign Affairs*. October 15, 2021.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2021-10-15/end-american-militarism>; Gomez, Eric. “U.S. Nuclear Policy at an Inflection Point.” *Cato Unbound*, September 16, 2020.

<https://www.cato-unbound.org/2020/09/16/eric-gomez/us-nuclear-policy-inflection-point/>.

¹⁹ Goldstein, Lyle J. *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging U.S.–China Rivalry*. Georgetown University Press, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs0cx>; Shiffrinson, Joshua. “The Rise of China, Balance of Power Theory, and U.S. National Security: Reasons for Optimism?” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43 No. 2, 2020. 175-216; Swaine, Michael D., Jessica J. Lee, and Rachel Esplin Odell. “Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order: A New U.S. Strategy in East Asia.” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2021.

<https://quincyinst.org/2021/01/11/toward-an-inclusive-balanced-regional-order-a-new-u-s-strategy-in-east-asia/>; Quincy Institute, *Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia*.

American democracy, economic growth, and U.S. national security.²⁰ Right–sizing the threats posed by China, along with a fact–based assessment of current and likely future U.S. and Western resources and capabilities, will provide the foundation for a realistic and effective Restraint–based strategy toward China.

A responsible Restraint perspective acknowledges that there are competitive aspects to the Sino–U.S. relationship, and that a Sino–U.S. security dilemma, along with low levels of trust, is to some extent unavoidable, especially given the different political systems of the two nations and China’s growing power, both globally and especially in Asia. However, the security dilemma can certainly be alleviated significantly, and not all great power competition need be zero–sum in nature. Furthermore, most Sino–U.S. competitions will not end in a neat “victory” for one side over the other, unless one or both regimes collapse, an unlikely prospect. Excessive levels and types of competition can unnecessarily undermine attempts at cooperation over issues such as climate change, as trust disappears and the good will needed to fashion mutual compromises evaporates.²¹

²⁰ This section is substantially drawn from Swaine. “Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military.”; Weiss. “The China Trap.”; Nathan, Andrew. “What Exactly Is America’s China Policy?” *Foreign Policy*. April 14, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/14/us-china-biden-strategy-geopolitics/>; Jentleson, Bruce W. “Be Wary of China Threat Inflation.” *Foreign Policy*. July 30, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/30/china-threat-inflation-united-states-soviet-union-cold-war/>; Pei, Minxin. “The China Threat Is Being Overhyped.” *Bloomberg*, May 27, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-05-27/u-s-shouldn-t-treat-china-as-an-existential-threat-at#xj4y7vzkg>; O’Hanlon, Michael. “Does the Pentagon report on China’s military correctly judge the threat?” Brookings, December 2, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/12/02/does-the-pentagon-report-on-chinas-military-correctly-judge-the-threat/>.

²¹ Beijing is generally convinced that the United States seeks to contain and oppress China under the pretext of competition. Beijing has also repeatedly indicated that full engagement and cooperation with Washington will be difficult as long as key bilateral issues are not handled properly. “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on September 22, 2021.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. September 22, 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202109/t20210922_9580314.html; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on October 18, 2021.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. October 18, 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202110/t20211018_9582768.html; Bradsher, Keith. “China’s Leader, With Rare Bluntness, Blames U.S. Containment for Troubles.” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/world/asia/china-us-xi-jinping.html>.

The current U.S. policy toward China is largely based on a zero-sum, adversarial mindset that assumes above all else a fundamental Chinese commitment to weakening and countering the West and resisting any form of meaningful bilateral cooperation. Beijing is regularly presented as a vaguely-defined existential threat, a rapidly growing military and economic power bent on global domination through predatory trade and investment practices and/or armed coercion, a burgeoning high-tech superpower determined to control the key drivers of future global growth, a hostile opponent of the existing so-called “rules-based” international order, and a pernicious threat to democratic societies from within.²² Moreover, in many instances, the alarm over such supposedly dire threats is magnified by the inaccurate claim that Washington had been essentially asleep at the wheel until very recently as China worked to undermine the United States and all democratic societies.²³

²² Carafano, James, Michael Pillsbury, Andrew Harding, and Jeff Smith. “Winning the New Cold War: A Plan for Countering China.” Heritage Foundation, 2023.

<https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/winning-the-new-cold-war-plan-countering-china>; Kelly, Laura and Rebecca Beitsch. “House panel lays out ‘existential struggle’ with China in primetime debut.” *The Hill*, February 28, 2023.

<https://thehill.com/homenews/house/3878516-house-panel-lays-out-existential-struggle-with-china-in-primetime-debut/>; Schuman, Michael. “How China Wants to Replace the U.S. Order.” *The Atlantic*, July 13, 2022.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/07/china-xi-jinping-global-security-initiative/670504/>; Romney, Mitt. “We can’t look away from China’s existential threat.” *The Washington Post*. May 13, 2021.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/mitt-romney-china-threat/2021/05/12/9651dcf2-b271-11eb-9059-d8176b9e3798_story.html; Brands, Hal and Michael Beckley. “What Does China Want?” *Foreign Policy*, August 13, 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/13/what-china-wants-us-conflict/>; Jorgensen, Malcolm. “China is overturning the rules-based order from within.” *The Interpreter*, August 12, 2020.

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-overturning-rules-based-order-within>; Hewitt, Hugh. “Americans must rally against the real threat to our democracy: China.” *The Washington Post*, December 27, 2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/27/china-democracy-biden-trump/>;

Thayer, Bradley A. and Lianchao Han, “Kissinger’s folly: The threat to world order is China,” *The Hill*, April 19, 2020,

<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/491507-kissingers-folly-the-threat-to-world-order-is-china/>;

Friedberg, Aaron L. “An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back Against Beijing.” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2020.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-08-11/ccp-answer-aggression>; Brands, Hal. “How to Make Biden’s Free World Strategy Work.” *Foreign Affairs*, May 24, 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2022-05-24/how-make-bidens-free-world-strategy-work>.

²³ Campbell, Kurt and Ely Ratner. “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations.” *Foreign Affairs*. March/April 2018,

China does pose certain challenges to existing and likely future U.S. interests. These consist primarily of:

- In the military arena, the danger of costly and destabilizing conflicts or severe crises, resulting from military and political provocations by either Beijing or Washington (or by U.S. allies) e.g., over Taiwan, disputed territories in Asia, the Korean Peninsula, or as a result of incidents involving U.S. and Chinese ships and aircraft operating in close proximity to one another.²⁴ Chinese military and political actions could also weaken U.S. alliances and reduce support for the forward-deployed U.S. military presence in Asia and elsewhere, thereby increasing the likelihood of arms races and miscalculations by the United States, China, and other states.²⁵
- In the economic and technological area,²⁶ the possibility of Chinese behavior eroding U.S. economic growth rates, U.S. competitiveness in some key high-tech areas, and possibly, in some extreme cases, U.S. access to certain technologies and critical regions, most notably Asia. Chinese actions in this area could also reduce the incentives for other nations to trade and invest heavily with the United States, whether as a result of Chinese pressure or zero-sum forms of competitiveness. China could weaken free market norms in various ways,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>; Doshi, Rush. *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. Oxford University Press, 2021; Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. St Martin's Griffin, 2016; Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "The Stealth Superpower: How China Hid Its Global Ambitions." *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2019,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/china-plan-rule-asia>.

²⁴ Swaine, Lee, and Odell. "Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order: A New U.S. Strategy in East Asia."

²⁵ Swaine and Shidore. "A Restraint Recipe for America's Asian Alliances and Security Partnerships."

²⁶ Bacchus, James, Simon Lester, and Huan Zhu. "Disciplining China's Trade Practices at the WTO: How WTO Complaints Can Help Make China More Market-Oriented." Cato Institute, November 2018.

<https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/disciplining-chinas-trade-practices-wto-how-wto-complaints-can-help-make-china-more>; Bateman, Jon. "U.S.-China Technological Decoupling: Strategy and Framework." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/25/u.s.-china-technological-decoupling-strategy-and-policy-framework-pub-86897>.

through its loan practices and political influence. And Beijing could damage key U.S. corporations by ejecting them from the critical Chinese market.

- In the area of norms and values, a concern that Chinese behavior over time could weaken existing Western norms regarding liberal democratic governance, centered on the rule of law, freedom of political speech and behavior, various cyber freedoms, and individual voter rights, as well as current or future norms concerning forms of foreign international intervention relating to human rights. China challenges many of these norms by stressing economic and physical security and top-down state authority over the protection of individual political freedoms and the activities of non-state actors outside of government control.

The current U.S. policy toward China is largely based on a zero-sum, adversarial mindset that assumes above all else a fundamental Chinese commitment to weakening and countering the West and resisting any form of meaningful bilateral cooperation.

While certainly very troublesome, and requiring effective countermeasures in many cases, these concerns are not grave enough to justify the kind of absolute, largely zero-sum and confrontational approach now common in U.S. policies toward Beijing. Many gray areas exist in all three of the above realms, largely reflecting Chinese support for long-standing core principles of the international order, such as state sovereignty, a preference for diplomacy over force in resolving disputes, the use of force only in defense of imminent and clear security threats, open air and sea lines of communication and transport across international zones, many market-based forms of economic intercourse, and various other United Nations norms and approaches.

In fact, critics of China's global stance often conflate the values and norms of the global order, as reflected in various international regimes and practices, with the U.S.–centered structure of global economic and military power.²⁷ In reality, the preservation or constructive adaptation of most of the values, structures, and processes of the global order does not require a single, dominant, democratic ruling power. The limited and contingent nature of Chinese threats requires a strong, competitive United States, clearer, more extensive, and to the extent possible, binding bilateral and international agreements, and specific, credible red lines regarding violations of truly vital interests. It also requires a common international commitment to resolve differences over contentious issues such as Taiwan, political rights and protectionism or state capitalism through negotiation and compromise.

Contrary to the prevailing mindset in Washington, China does not pose an existential or near–existential threat to the United States in the above areas. It is not in a position either to replace the dominance of U.S. and Western economic and military power worldwide or to overturn the so–called liberal world order.²⁸

As a military power, Beijing poses no threat to the existence of the United States except possibly via an extremely unlikely nuclear attack, which would be suicidal. There is no

²⁷ Cooley, Alexander and Daniel H. Nexon. "The Real Crisis of Global Order: Illiberalism on the Rise." *Foreign Affairs*. December 14, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-12-14/illiberalism-real-crisis-global-order>; Cooper, Zack and Hal Brands. "America Will Only Win When China's Regime Fails." *Foreign Policy*. March 11, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/11/america-chinas-regime-fails/>; Atlantic Council. "The Longer Telegram: Toward a New American China Strategy." Atlantic Council. 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/the-longer-telegram/>; McMaster, H.R. "How China Sees the World and How We Should See China." *The Atlantic*. May 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/mcmaster-china-strategy/609088/>; Pottinger, Matthew. "Beijing's American Hustle." *Foreign Affairs*. September/October 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-08-23/beijings-american-hustle>.

²⁸ Weiss. "The China Trap."; Swaine. "Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military"; Swaine, Michael D. "China Doesn't Pose an Existential Threat for America." *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/21/china-existential-threat-america/>; Odell, Rachel Esplin. "Why it's wrong for the U.S. to label China a threat to the 'world order.'" *Responsible Statecraft*, March 20, 2021, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/03/20/why-its-wrong-for-the-us-to-label-china-a-threat-to-the-world-order/>; Shifrinson, Joshua. "How Donald Trump Should Handle China's Growing Power." *The National Interest*, March 8, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/how-donald-trump-should-handle-chinas-growing-power-130737>.

evidence that China wants to threaten, much less use, its relatively small (but growing), second-strike, counter-value strategic nuclear force to attack the United States or its allies. To the contrary, there is much evidence to suggest that China's leadership regards nuclear weapons predominantly as a deterrent, not as a possible first-strike, offensive war weapon.²⁹



Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III greets Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, June 10, 2022. (DoD photo by Chad J. McNeeley).

Moreover, Beijing's recent improvements of its strategic nuclear forces are almost certainly intended primarily to increase the survivability of its second-strike force in the face of significant improvements in U.S. offensive nuclear capabilities and ballistic missile defense. The Chinese might also be expanding their nuclear arsenal in response to an increased fear that Washington would level nuclear threats or actually employ

²⁹ Fravel, M. Taylor. "8. China's Nuclear Strategy since 1964" in *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 236–69, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691185590-012>; Niquet, Valerie. "China's Nuclear Gambit." *The Diplomat*, November 6, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/chinas-nuclear-gambit/>.

tactical nuclear weapons in a future Taiwan conflict, if the U.S. military were losing on a conventional level.³⁰ That speaks to the urgent need to stabilize that worsening situation (as discussed below).

On the conventional level, Chinese military capabilities are for the foreseeable future only of serious concern in the western Pacific, where Beijing has reached a rough parity of forces with the United States and Japan along the first island chain near Taiwan, and is arguably now the dominant military power in the South China Sea, as measured in numbers of naval and air platforms.³¹ But even in this vast region, China is not poised to acquire the kind of overwhelming conventional power that would give it the military confidence, even in the face of high political and economic costs, to attempt to seize Taiwan by force, eject the United States from the region, or assert total, direct control over the South China Sea or maritime Asia as a whole – unless, that is, the United States were to force it to undertake the acquisition of such capabilities and take such actions by threatening to permanently separate Taiwan from China, or by precipitating a conflict in the region.³²

Fears that China has decided in the near or medium future to invade Taiwan and, going further, is planning eventual aggression against other Asian states are therefore unconvincing.³³ The lessons of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and particularly Russia's failures

³⁰ Swaine. "Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military.," Zhao, Tong. "What's Driving China's Nuclear Buildup?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/05/what-s-driving-china-s-nuclear-buildup-pub-85106>.

³¹ Swaine. "Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military.," McDevitt, Michael. *China as a Twenty-first Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*. Annapolis, Md. Naval Institute Press, 2020.

³² Swaine. "Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military.," Weiss, Jessica C. "Don't Panic About Taiwan." *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2023.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/taiwan-chinese-invasion-dont-panic>; Swaine, Michael D. "The Worrisome Erosion of the One China Policy." *The National Interest*, February 27, 2023.

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/worrisome-erosion-one-china-policy-206253>; Blanchette, Jude and Ryan Hass. "The Taiwan Long Game." *Foreign Affairs*, December 20, 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/taiwan-long-game-best-solution-jude-blanchette-ryan-hass>; Fravel, M Taylor, et al. "How to Avoid a War Over Taiwan." *Foreign Affairs*, October 13, 2023.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/how-avoid-war-over-taiwan>.

³³ Colby, Elbridge. *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*. Yale University Press, 2021; Colby, Elbridge. "America Must Prepare for a War Over Taiwan." *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/america-must-prepare-war-over-taiwan>;

in Ukraine reinforce for the Chinese the difficulties of an all-out invasion of Taiwan, as discussed further in the appendix.³⁴

Beyond this, China is nowhere near acquiring the capabilities to replace the United States as a global military hegemon and shows few if any signs of having made a commitment to do so.³⁵ This would require a force structure capable of successfully fending off any attempt to defeat Chinese military components within virtually any ocean or air space, and to safeguard passage to virtually any major world port. The United States has enjoyed something approaching this capacity for decades. China is far from attaining it and currently has no clear imperative to do so. This does not mean China will eschew developing a military with a significant global presence. It has already done this to some extent in the naval realm. And Chinese leaders have said that their goal is to develop “world-class forces” by 2049.³⁶ But such a presence could take many forms well below anything approaching that of the U.S. military today, including relatively small-sized, high-quality flotillas or expeditionary groups capable of conducting a variety of important missions well short of achieving control overall critical international ocean areas and air spaces.³⁷

Pomfret, John and Matt Pottinger. “Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War.” *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/xi-jinping-says-he-preparing-china-war>.

³⁴ Goldstein, Lyle and Nathan Waechter. “As Russia’s Military Stumbles in Ukraine, Chinese Strategists Are Taking Notes.” *The Diplomat*, February 24, 2023.

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/as-russias-military-stumbles-in-ukraine-chinese-strategists-are-taking-notes/>; Feigenbaum, Evan and Adam Szubin. “What China Has Learned From the Ukraine War.” *Foreign Affairs*, February 14, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/what-china-has-learned-ukraine-war>.

³⁵ Swaine. “Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military.”; Fravel, M. Taylor. “China’s ‘World-Class Military’ Ambitions: Origins and Implications.” *The Washington Quarterly* 43 no.1 (Spring 2020), 85-99; Roy, Danny. “China Won’t Achieve Regional Hegemony.” *The Washington Quarterly* 43 no.1 (Spring 2020), 101-117.

³⁶ Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” July 24, 2019. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content_4846452.htm.

³⁷ This paragraph is taken from Swaine, Michael D. “The PLA Navy’s Strategic Transformation to the ‘Far Seas’: How Far, How Threatening, and What’s to be Done.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/07/pla-navy-s-strategic-transformation-to-far-seas-how-far-how-threatening-and-what-s-to-be-done-pub-80588>; Also see Quincy Institute. *Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia*; Heginbotham, Eric and Jacob Heim. “Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism under Austerity.” *Washington Quarterly* 38 No.1, 2020. 185–99; Castillo, Jasen J. “Deliberate Escalation: Nuclear Strategies to Deter or to Stop Conventional Attacks.” In *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*. Eds. Greenhill, Kelly M., and Peter Krause. New York, Oxford University Press, 2018.

The above suggests that China is unlikely to undertake an unprovoked, out-of-the-blue lunge at Taiwan, or anywhere else in the region, either today or in the near-to-medium-term (i.e., to about 2035). The most prominent threat will emerge from miscalculations stemming from efforts by the United States, China, and other nations to deter one another in an extreme, zero-sum manner within an increasingly hostile and polarized security landscape. This could involve a high-risk miscalculation and resulting overreaction in the use of military force by one or both sides stemming from excessive overconfidence or insecurity, in response to perceived provocations. In other words, the primary China-related threat is not about the threat Beijing poses to the United States, other nations, or the global order. It is the threat that arises from an interactive, worsening security competition driven by threat inflation and zero-sum worst casing of actions and motives on both sides.³⁸

The primary China-related threat is not about the threat Beijing poses to the United States, other nations, or the global order. It is the threat that arises from an interactive, worsening security competition driven by threat inflation and zero-sum worst casing of actions and motives on both sides.

Moreover, the Chinese almost certainly realize that any effort to achieve global (or even regional) military dominance over the United States will prove extremely costly, could ultimately fail, or place it in a virtually endless, mutually debilitating zero-sum military rivalry with Washington. This sort of gamble is even more unlikely given the enormous domestic challenges that China faces, including high levels of pollution, a rapidly aging population, a weakened leadership succession system, limited domestic natural

³⁸ This paragraph is drawn from Swaine. "Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military."

resources, low levels of productivity, and an excessively ideological, repressive, and top-down policy approach to development and social order.³⁹

These challenges demand a continuous, long-term emphasis on ensuring domestic order and growth, not expanding China's powers to dominate all others. All this implies that, despite its ambitious goals, likely belief that the West is in decline, and increasing suspicion and pushback toward the United States, Beijing's policies will necessarily allow for some level of flexibility that could make global (and even Asian) competition more constructive and less destructive, while keeping many doors open to some level of meaningful cooperation between the two powers, including in the military-security arena.

It is certainly not inconceivable that growing threats to China's sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and overseas economic and political interests could one day cause China's leaders to fundamentally reassess the nation's strategic interests and

³⁹ Perkins, Dwight H. "Structural Challenges to Sustained Economic Growth in China." *China & World Economy* 31: 22-43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cwe.12457>; Rajah, Roland and Alyssa Leng. "Revising down the rise of China." The Lowy Institute, March 14, 2022. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/revising-down-rise-china>; Yao, Yang, Yiping Huang, and David Dollar. *China 2049: Economic Challenges of a Rising Global Power*. Brookings Institution Press, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/china-2049-economic-challenges-of-a-rising-global-power>; Roberts, Dexter Tiff. "The domestic challenges that threaten China's superpower future." The Atlantic Council, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-domestic-challenges-that-threaten-chinas-superpower-future/>; Yiu, Pak, et al. "China's aging population threatens a Japan-style lost decade." *Nikkei Asia*, March 22, 2023. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/China-s-aging-population-threatens-a-Japan-style-lost-decade>; Blanchette, Jude and Richard McGregor. "China's Looming Succession Crisis." *Foreign Affairs*, July 20, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-07-20/chinas-looming-succession-crisis>; Cohen, Ariel. "China's Energy Crisis Deepens With Potentially Fatal Consequences." *Forbes*, October 19, 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2021/10/19/chinas-energy-crisis-deepens-with-potentially-fatal-consequences/?sh=548da8a41163>; Acemoglu, Daron. "China's Economy Is Rotting from the Head." Project Syndicate, October 28, 2022. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/xi-jinping-china-economy-rotting-from-the-head-by-daron-acemoglu-2022-10?barrier=accesspaylog>; Brandt, Loren et al. "China's Productivity Slowdown and Future Growth Potential." The World Bank Group. 2020. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33993>; Pei, Minxin. "Minxin Pei on why China will not surpass the United States." *The Economist*. August 30, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/08/30/minxin-pei-on-why-china-will-not-surpass-the-united-states>.

goals in the direction of a costly, dominance-oriented military strategy. Nonetheless, it would be reckless to assume that such a reassessment is inevitable and that the many factors in favor of cooperation and balance in China's present-day global (and regional) strategy will disappear. Indeed, the huge costs and risks involved in a Chinese attempt to displace the United States as the dominant global military power are unlikely to diminish to such a degree in the decades ahead that Beijing would conclude it is worth the effort to undertake – unless, of course, Washington makes it clear that it is using its global military dominance to support efforts to strangle China and threaten the stability of its government.⁴⁰

In the economic and technological arenas, blanket, unqualified characterizations of China's economy as "predatory" or "mercantilist" and its loan and assistance programs as "debt-inducing" distort the reality that some Chinese abuses exist alongside huge levels of mutual economic benefit for many countries.⁴¹ Moreover, China poses a limited, not comprehensive and existential, economic and technological threat to the United States, in the form of commercial and technology theft (of which at least the latter is apparently diminishing), unfair trading practices, and other activities that result in unfair advantages or possibly dominance in some specific areas.⁴²

⁴⁰ Swaine. "The PLA Navy's Strategic Transformation to the 'Far Seas': How Far, How Threatening, and What's to be Done."

⁴¹ According to the IMF, China accounted for 30 percent of all growth worldwide in the five years from 2013 to 2022. "World economic outlook." IMF. October 2022.

<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/10/11/world-economic-outlook-october-2022>;

Roach, Stephen. *Accidental Conflict: America, China, and the Clash of False Narratives*. (United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2022); Mak, Robyn and Una Galani. "China's growth path will be felt around the world." *Reuters*. October 14, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/breakingviews/chinas-growth-path-will-be-felt-around-world-2022-10-14/>; Kemp,

John. "China has replaced U.S. as locomotive of global economy: Kemp." *Reuters*, November 5, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-economy-global-kemp-column/china-has-replaced-u-s-as-locomotive-of-global-economy-kemp-idU.S.KBN1XF211>.

⁴² Bateman. "U.S.-China Technological Decoupling: Strategy and Framework."; Lincicome, Scott. "The China Threat Meets the China Reality." Cato Institute, June 2, 2021,

<https://www.cato.org/commentary/china-threat-meets-china-reality>; Henderson, David R. "Is China An Economic Threat?" Hoover Institution, August 27, 2020.

<https://www.hoover.org/research/china-economic-threat>; Huang, Yukon and Jeremy Smith. "China's Record on Intellectual Property Rights Is Getting Better and Better." *Foreign Policy*, October 16, 2019.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/16/china-intellectual-property-theft-progress/>.

It is highly unlikely that such practices would result in decisive Chinese leverage over the United States, given the likelihood of continued American global economic and technological power and expertise, based on the continuation of its high-quality higher education system, its rule of law, its competitive energy and drive, its overall receptivity to talented immigrants, and its ample domestic resource base.⁴³ All of these features urgently need strengthening. But this places an even greater premium on reducing distracting and destructive tensions with China. And in any event, America's advantages are unlikely to diminish to such an extent that China will achieve decisive leverage over the United States, given its own huge domestic problems.

There is also the threat that would result from excessive decoupling of the United States and China in many economic and technological areas. Such actions would produce high levels of inefficiency, lower the benefits of global exchange, and create excessive confidence in the quixotic goal of removing all vulnerabilities to the U.S. economy.⁴⁴ As a

⁴³ Cann, Oliver. "What makes America the world's most competitive economy?" World Economic Forum, October 16, 2018.

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/10/what-makes-america-the-world-s-most-competitive-economy/>; Lipsky, Josh. "The 2021 Economic Scoreboard: How China stacks up with the U.S. and its allies." The Atlantic Council, 2021.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/the-big-story/the-2021-economic-scorecard-how-china-stacks-up-with-the-us-and-its-allies/>.

⁴⁴ U.S. Chamber of Commerce, *UNDERSTANDING DECOUPLING: Macro Trends and Industry Impacts* Washington, D.C. U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2021.

https://www.uschamber.com/assets/archived/images/024001_us_china_decoupling_report_fin.pdf; Lee, Alexa. *The U.S.-China Tech Rivalry: Don't Decouple – Diversify* (Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2022),

https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/U.S._China%20Tech.pdf; Davidson, Michael R., et al. "Risks of decoupling from China on low-carbon technologies." *Science* 377, 1266 (2022). DOI: 10.1126/science.abq5446; Bateman, Jon. "The Fevered Anti-China Attitude in Washington Is Going to Backfire." *Politico*, December 15, 2022.

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/12/15/china-tech-decoupling-sanctions-00071723>; Manning, Robert. "Locking China Out of the Global Order Could Backfire." *Foreign Policy*, May 9, 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/09/china-global-order-decoupling-xi-beijing-reforms/>; Prakash, Parthana. "The World Bank warns that the U.S.–China rift could hurt Asia's growth and 'the global availability of knowledge.'" *Fortune*, March 31, 2023.

<https://fortune.com/2023/03/31/world-bank-u-s-china-decoupling-hurting-asia-growth-knowledge/>; Pei, Minxin. "China Hawks Are Throwing Away Their Strongest Weapon." *Bloomberg*, March 9, 2023.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-03-09/us-china-hawks-should-want-to-prevent-economic-decoupling#xj4y7vzkg>.

result, U.S. (and Chinese) economic growth and resiliency would decline, along with overall global growth and prosperity.

In addition, it is virtually certain that any effort by Beijing to create a Sino-centric, hegemonic regional (or global) order would encounter serious resistance from many other major states aside from the United States (such as Japan, South Korea, India, Germany, France, and the U.K.), many of which have or could muster considerable economic and military capabilities and would politically and ideologically oppose being dominated by an autocratic China. Although these states could not counterbalance Chinese aggression on their own, they would likely unify to greatly augment a U.S. effort to do so, if necessary.⁴⁵

It is virtually certain that any effort by Beijing to create a Sino-centric, hegemonic regional (or global) order would encounter serious resistance from many other major states aside from the United States.

Regarding global norms, despite assertions by some to the contrary, China is not committed (and does not have the capability) to overturn what many describe as the global order, replacing it with an autocratic, mercantilist, Sinocentric order.⁴⁶ First, this argument relies on the false notion that such an order is centered primarily, if not solely, on the three principles of democracy, human rights, and a free market economic system. In reality, the global order consists of a wide array of norm-based regimes and

⁴⁵ Goldstein. *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging U.S.-China Rivalry*; Posen, Barry R. *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*.

⁴⁶ Johnston, Alastair Iain. "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations." *International Security* 44, No. 2, 2019. 9–60. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360; Mazarr, Michael J., Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos. "China and the International Order." RAND Corporation, 2018. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2423.html.

understandings, only some of which are associated with Western–defined concepts.⁴⁷ Moreover, numerous studies have shown that Beijing benefits from and upholds the goals and norms of many of these regimes, such as those governing relatively free trade and finance, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation, freedom of navigation, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the management of transnational security threats. China presses for reforms in global institutions that are, in many cases, long overdue, including the idea of providing greater representation for China and developing states in multilateral economic organizations.⁴⁸

Beijing does want to reduce the influence of Western liberal democratic values within global regimes in favor of a more state–centered set of views that reflect the values of economic growth, top–down political control, limited political freedoms, and social order. However, despite some American rhetoric to the contrary, Beijing is not energetically engaged in a deliberate effort to duplicate its system across the world, nor poised to establish a predatory, debt–inducing network of dominance across Eurasia via the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁹ In fact, unlike many 19th and early 20th century imperialist powers, with some limited exceptions during the revolutionary Mao Zedong era in the 1970s, China has not espoused an ideology or mindset that views the acquisition of

⁴⁷ Johnston. “China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations.”

⁴⁸ Johnston. “China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations.”; Mazarr et al. “China and the International Order.”; Swaine, Lee, and Odell. “Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order: A New U.S. Strategy in East Asia.”; Weinhardt, Clara and Tobias ten Brink. “Varieties of Contestation: China’s Rise and the Liberal Trade Order.” *Review of International Political Economy* 27, no. 2 (2019): 258–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1699145>.

⁴⁹ Jones, Lee and Shahar Hameiri. “Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-trap Diplomacy.’” Chatham House, August 19, 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy>; Brautigam, Deborah and Meg Rithmire. “The Chinese ‘Debt Trap’ Is a Myth.” *The Atlantic*, February 6, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/02/china-debt-trap-diplomacy/617953/>; Nyabiage, Jevans. “China hits back at Africa debt-trap claims with loan write-off offer.” *South China Morning Post*, August 24, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3189998/china-hits-back-africa-debt-trap-claims-loan-write-off>; Kratz, Agatha, Allen Feng, and Logan Wright. “New Data on the ‘Debt Trap’ Question.” Rhodium Group, April 29, 2019, <https://rhg.com/research/new-data-on-the-debt-trap-question/>.

other territories or the coercive expansion of its system to other countries as essential to its continued national vitality.⁵⁰



Nanchang, China – March 7, 2023 – Exposed river beds are seen between the Nanchang Bridge and Bayi Bridge in the Nanchang section of the Ganjiang River in Nanchang city, Jiangxi province, China, March 7, 2023. Many regions of China have experienced severe drought in recent years, likely exacerbated by climate change. (Photo by CFOTO/Sipa USA).

Finally, the so-called global order is rapidly becoming a multipolar order that no single country can dominate in most or all spheres.⁵¹ Hence, even if Beijing wanted to create a Sinocentric order, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to see how they could make this happen.

Despite the above developments and conflicting interests, Beijing continues to recognize its own need to sustain substantive areas of cooperation with Washington

⁵⁰ Weiss, Jessica Chen. “Ch 4: An Ideological Contest in U.S.-China Relations?” in deLisle, Jacques and Avery Goldstein. *After Engagement: Dilemmas in U.S.-China Security Relations*. Brookings Institution Press, 2021. 124–54; Pepinsky, Thomas and Jessica Chen Weiss. “The Clash of Systems?” *Foreign Affairs*, June 11, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-11/clash-systems>.

⁵¹ Beebe. “Managed Competition: A U.S. Grand Strategy for a Multipolar World.”; Shidore, Sarang. “Winning the Majority: A New U.S. Bargain with the Global South.” Quincy Institute, 2022. <https://quincyinst.org/report/winning-the-majority-a-new-u-s-bargain-with-the-global-south/>; Walt, Stephen. “America Is Too Scared of the Multipolar World.” *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/07/america-is-too-scared-of-the-multipolar-world/>.

and to avoid slipping into a truly adversarial, destructive, and purely mercantilist form of competition. While increasingly assertive, the Chinese see the obvious problems of such a stance. Of course, it is possible that Beijing eventually comes to regard the high risks of engaging in such intense competition as worth taking, if the danger of not doing so increases. Such a change in perception could occur in part as a result of a continued U.S. or broader Western drive toward confrontation and zero-sum competition with Beijing. This development would greatly undermine those voices within China who favor moderation in the U.S.–China rivalry. In addition it would significantly raise the danger of Sino–American crises and military conflict, and divert huge amounts of U.S. resources away from desperately needed non–military uses at home and abroad.⁵²

The Key Elements of a Restraint Approach to China

From the above, it is clear that a responsible Restraint strategy toward China should seek to replace the current, largely zero-sum, comprehensive competition and confrontation with Beijing with a stable, balanced, mutually beneficial form of peaceful coexistence and bounded competition that can sustain global peace and prosperity while effectively addressing the primary threats facing both countries. This will require a policy toward China geared to effective deterrence regarding red lines, alongside mutual, credible reassurance in key areas, and the channeling of Sino–U.S. competition into as many constructive realms as possible, most importantly including the effort to combat the overriding threats posed by climate change, pandemics, nuclear war, WMD proliferation, and global financial and economic disorder.

⁵² Rooney, Bryan, Grant Johnson, and Miranda Priebe. “How Does Defense Spending Affect Economic Growth?” RAND Corporation, 2021. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA739-2.html; De La Garza, Alejandro. “To Take Climate Change Seriously, the U.S. Military Needs to Shrink.” TIME, February 17, 2022. <https://time.com/6148778/us-military-climate-change/>; Crawford, Neta C. “Pentagon Fuel Use, Climate Change, and the Costs of War.” Watson Institute, 2019. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/Pentagon%20Fuel%20Use%2C%20Climate%20Change%20and%20the%20Costs%20of%20War%20Revised%20November%202019%20Crawford.pdf>.

An open-ended, winner-take-all security competition can substantially increase the chance of crises and conflict and eliminate options for cooperation in dealing with the truly existential threats all nations face. Ending hostile, zero-sum political rhetoric, and replacing simplistic, confrontational policies with prudent, balanced approaches to contentious issues holds the possibility of creating the intellectual and political space for compromise and the search for common ground.

A Restraint strategy toward China would thus have six main goals:

- 1) To construct a new national public narrative that redefines and expands the concept of national security to prioritize common transnational threats over narrow, interstate security competition and arms racing. Avoiding or reducing greatly the intensity of the latter should obviously be an important precondition permitting a focus on the former. In this regard, China should be seen as one major pole in an increasingly complex and multipolar world that no single nation will have the capacity to dominate or lead. Instead of casting Beijing as an existential threat and intense, zero-sum competitor for global control, Washington should focus on reducing the effect of those ideological, political/military, and historical factors driving the current highly interactive Sino-U.S. rivalry to which both nations contribute, while developing more positive-sum modes of interaction.

An open-ended, winner-take-all security competition can substantially increase the chance of crises and conflict and eliminate options for cooperation in dealing with the truly existential threats all nations face.

- 2) To minimize the chances of a nuclear or major conventional conflict with China by stabilizing the Taiwan situation (see Appendix), reducing incentives for arms

acing and security competition, and increasing incentives for positive-sum, cooperative approaches in the economic, technological, and security realms.

- 3) To maximize economic openness and stability by building more inclusive and integrated, Asia-wide and global economic structures and relationships, limiting economic and technological decoupling with China to genuinely critical national security areas, avoiding competing economic blocs, and strengthening the U.S. ability to play a stronger and more influential economic and technological role in Asia and beyond.
- 4) To facilitate the Asian (and especially Sino-U.S.) contribution to combating climate change by reaching regional (and especially American and Chinese) acceptance of the primary threat that rapidly developing phenomenon poses to all nations, as a first step toward developing a coordinated regional (and global) strategy involving – e.g., broad agreements on the trade of environmental products and the development of climate technologies.
- 5) To buy the time that will enable Americans to repair their severely damaged domestic political and economic order, a goal essential for maintaining U.S. economic and technological competitiveness, and for creating predictability in U.S. policies across administrations, and raising the overall image of the United States in the world.
- 6) To reallocate national security resources to address concerns that pose a greater proximate danger to the security and well-being of the American people than does China. Two specific concerns stand out: first, an erosion of faith in the established domestic constitutional order, and second, environmental degradation, most prominently expressed in the climate crisis.

The “Best Case” Strategy

To achieve these goals, a “best case” version of a long-term U.S. restraint strategy should focus on building an inclusive, cooperative, highly interdependent, and multipolar global and regional order that does not rely upon either American or Chinese military or economic primacy or dominance. This should involve two elements:

- Region-wide, cooperative political/diplomatic, economic/technological, and military security structures and agreements to address specific common regional and global threats, including first and foremost climate change, followed by pandemics, financial instability, cyber-attacks, and WMD proliferation.
- Limited collective security arrangements with U.S. allies and partners, China, and possibly other nations to ensure maritime security and combat terrorism, and resolve local disputes and conflicts.

These two sets of “best case” elements of a Restraint strategy will require at least a dozen sets of preconditions:

- 1) The official abrogation of the Bush Doctrine of preventive war in favor of a policy that commits the United States to using force only as a last resort and (except in immediate self-defense) only with the prior authorization of Congress and in compliance with the U.N. Charter. Washington should demand that China also honor the latter norm.
- 2) Acceptance by senior policymakers of an expanded, overarching redefinition of national security and well-being that includes a primary focus on addressing common transnational threats and global challenges over narrow, inter-state security competition and arms racing, and a recognition of the common need for all countries to promote economic justice alongside economic growth.

This change in priorities will likely require the emergence of a less paranoid and more pragmatic, diplomacy-oriented leadership in both China and the United States, involving

a reassessment and reordering of threat perceptions. This could emerge from a deeper appreciation of the dangers of conflict inherent in the current Sino–U.S. dynamic, along with a genuine recognition of the overriding need to increase cooperation to deal with increasingly obvious common threats such as climate change.⁵³



Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken attends the ASEAN-U.S. Ministerial in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on August 4, 2022. (State Department Photo by Freddie Everett).

- 3) Detailed, sustained U.S. policy deliberations with key East Asian allies, the ASEAN states, other East Asian nations (including China) India and the E.U. regarding the most appropriate norms and types of fora, understandings, etc. required for developing regional approaches to handling common transnational threats and strengthening cooperative security interactions. In the critical area of climate

⁵³ This should involve well-grounded assessments of the huge political, economic, and security-related damage that would result from a major Sino-U.S. clash over Taiwan, including the possibility of such a clash escalating to the nuclear level. Cancian, Mark F., Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham. "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan." CSIS, January 9, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>.

change, given the manifestly unsatisfactory progress under the U.N. Climate Change Conference of Parties umbrella, Washington should propose the creation of a PRC/U.S.–led “Emergency Climate Change Commission,” with the two wealthiest and top pollution–emitting nations on the planet jointly undertaking a massive and well–funded effort to address the problem – and thereby demonstrating the feasibility of collaboration, rather than adversarial competition.

As part of this overall process, Washington should also revisit versions of some of the more positive-sum initiatives that were proposed during the 2000–10 time frame, including the cooperative maritime security strategy of former Joint Chiefs Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen, South Korea’s Sunshine policy toward North Korea, the joint Sino–Japanese proposal to develop the East China Sea into a realm of peace, prosperity, and cooperation, and the East Asian Community concept promoted by many Japanese policy elites during the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁵⁴

- 4) The deployment of a less provocative, more affordable, defensively–oriented, U.S. regional force posture sufficient to support stability across the Taiwan Strait, perform emerging cooperative and collective security functions, and dampen the security dilemma. This will likely require, at a minimum, over at least the short to medium term, a set of denial (not control)–oriented military capabilities and force postures, CBMs, and cooperative security dialogues among the top Asian

⁵⁴ Moon, Chung-in. *The Sunshine Policy: In Defense of Engagement as a Path to Peace in Korea*. Yonsei University Press, 2012; The United States Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*. Washington D.C., October 2007. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090227115427/http://www.navy.mil/maritime/MaritimeStrategy.pdf>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “Cooperation between Japan and China in the East China Sea.” June 18, 2008. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000091726.pdf>; Hatoyama, Yukio. “Japan’s New Commitment to Asia – Toward the Realization of an East Asian Community.” Speech delivered in Singapore, November 15, 2009. The Government of Japan. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/hatoyama/statement/200911/15singapore_e.html.

powers sufficient to deter against realistic threats of attack without provoking open-ended arms racing.⁵⁵

Such a U.S. force posture would require a significant restructuring of U.S. forces in the Western Pacific, with a narrower focus on improving air- and naval-based denial capabilities, a greatly reduced ground force presence, much greater levels of U.S. and allied resilience to Chinese missile attacks, and enhanced Taiwan defense capabilities. This would likely entail greatly improved passive and active defenses on land, a more dispersed pattern of force deployments, greater numbers of anti-ship and anti-air cruise and other missiles, less reliance on large, forward deployed aircraft carriers, a greater reliance on more limited-range unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), submarines and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, and a greater ability to resupply Guam and more forward areas from Hawaii and Continental United States. In a crisis or conflict, these capabilities would focus on interdicting, deterring or destroying offshore Chinese forces arrayed against Taiwan without striking logistics points and C4ISR locations deep within the Chinese mainland, thereby limiting escalation. The overall objective of this force posture would be to blunt any Chinese attack long enough to permit additional U.S. forces to be brought in from out of theater without escalating the conflict by striking early on targets on the Chinese mainland.

Aside from these changes in force structure and defense strategy, an effective active denial posture would also require serious U.S. efforts to reduce tensions with Beijing and thereby lower China's incentives to sustain high levels of military modernization and employ force in the first place, and to improve both U.S. and Chinese crisis management and deescalation capabilities. Such efforts should center on stabilizing the Taiwan situation through a variety of measures outlined in the appendix. Moreover, such a force posture and strategy will likely be welcomed by U.S. allies and partners because it is

⁵⁵ Quincy Institute, *Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia*; Over the long term, if and as security relations improve among Asian nations, the role of the United States in this denial force posture in Asia should decline considerably, and be replaced by more cooperative security structures among the other Asian states. This would then permit some reductions in the overall denial force posture in place.

more credible and economically and politically sustainable than the alternatives and because it would be sensitive to the cross–pressures and trade–offs allies and partners face regarding the rise of China.⁵⁶

- 5) Likely greater levels of defense burden sharing by U.S. allies in Asia, in support of specific, agreed–upon security goals, along with discussions on redefining the purpose of U.S. alliances, to transition gradually from largely one–sided bilateral security pacts based on high levels of U.S. forward presence directed at China and North Korea, to support for broader cooperative and collective regional security arrangements, CBMs and a Korea peace regime, the latter as part of a two–track strategy of tension reduction and demilitarization leading to the eventual denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the signing of a peace treaty and CBMs with Pyongyang.

The United States should affirm its existing security commitments to Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines, but with no further expansion of forces or bases. Washington should also sustain a comprehensive schedule of military exercises with regional allies while scrupulously adhering to defensive scenarios. In this process, the United States needs to provide greater assistance in strengthening the independent, indigenous defense capacities of allies and filling in gaps in their deterrence capabilities.

However, U.S. policies should place an equally high priority on encouraging all Asian states to support a more cooperative and inclusive regional order, providing for their own welfare and security as much as possible through positive–sum forms of engagement with one another that reduce the worst casing of objectives and intentions and hence lower the need to expend huge amounts of resources to build up their military capabilities. Under this scenario, the U.S.–Japan alliance would likely

⁵⁶ Swaine, Michael D. “Active denial:’ the best way to challenge status quo and avoid war with China.” *Responsible Statecraft*, June 23, 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/06/23/active-denial-the-best-way-to-challenge-status-quo-and-avoid-war-with-china/>.

approximate what Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama had in mind in 2009–10: a more equal alliance, with a reduced U.S. military presence and Tokyo strictly adhering to a defensive policy even while increasing defense expenditures and pursuing a multilateral cooperative security process.

In this, the United States should play a low–level role, allowing other Asian nations to define their own security and development needs without relying primarily on U.S. forward–deployed forces or U.S. economic assistance or leverage. Washington should consider promoting the creation of an Asian equivalent of the Organization for Security and Co–operation in Europe (OSCE), to “bridge differences and build trust between states by cooperating on conflict prevention, crisis management and post–conflict rehabilitation.”⁵⁷ The aim will be to encourage greater collective Asian responsibility for Asian stability.

As part of this process, the U.S.–led security pact AUKUS, which seeks to position a highly costly, new offensive capability in Australia, should be seriously reconsidered.⁵⁸ The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia should eliminate its military dimensions and greatly enhance its ability to deliver the public goods it has promised.⁵⁹

- 6) Related to the previous point, given its sensitive position in Asia, this “best case” strategy should avoid any efforts to push Japan away from its current peace constitution or greatly increase its defense spending (especially if this is geared towards a Taiwan intervention), as long as progress is being made toward lessening regional security competition and increasing cooperative security

⁵⁷ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. “Who we are.” <https://www.osce.org/who-we-are>.

⁵⁸ Shidore, Sarang. “AUKUS’ military alliance is another Western attempt to isolate China.” *Responsible Statecraft*, September 17, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/09/17/uk-us-australian-nuclear-sub-deal-is-another-western-attempt-to-isolate-china/>; “The U.S.–Australia Alliance and Australia’s Evolving Orientation in Asia.” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, May 25, 2022. <https://quincyinst.org/event/the-u-s-australia-alliance-and-australias-evolving-orientation-in-asia/>.

⁵⁹ Shidore, Sarang. “The Quad’s Perils Outweigh its Promises.” *Responsible Statecraft*, September 27, 2021, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/09/27/does-the-quads-perils-outweigh-its-promises/>.

measures. Japan should make any decision to increase its military capabilities or alter its peace constitution largely on its own, without U.S. pressure.

In addition, absent the complete collapse of Sino–U.S. understandings regarding Taiwan and a marked increase in hostility, the Japanese government should continue resisting any commitment in advance to backing a U.S. decision to employ force in a possible confrontation or conflict with Beijing over the island. The United States should accept such a restrained Japanese stance, which could create more incentives for Washington to act in turn in a restrained manner toward the Taiwan issue. Indeed, under this “best case” scenario of increasing cooperation with Beijing, Tokyo should avoid acquiring provocative new weapons systems (such as intermediate and long–range, land attack missiles), while working with South Korea and other allies to use its leverage as a location for U.S. bases to argue for such restraint.

- 7) The establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, to include a formal peace treaty, diplomatic recognition of North Korea by the United States and by each Korean regime with the other, and the eventual end of the UN command structure, as well as: a) major reductions in military forces on both sides (including the eventual removal of U.S. combat forces from the peninsula as and if tensions abate); b) significant CBMs and crisis management mechanisms; c) at the very least clear caps on Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program and strong prohibitions on WMD proliferation; and d) greater engagement with North Korea at all levels, especially mil–to–mil, economic, inter–parliamentary, and people–to–people, active efforts at conventional force reductions and other CBMs, and regular diplomatic engagement.

This long–term process should begin with an “end–of–war” declaration and the lifting of certain sanctions in return for formal North Korean pledges to end nuclear weapons testing, intercontinental ballistic missile tests, and any expansion in the number of its nuclear warheads. The medium–term objective would be to reduce the importance of military deterrence, build North Korean economic incentives to cooperate, create new

pathways for reassurance, and build incentives for greater social interaction, especially for separated families.

North Korea could of course undermine any part of the movement toward a peace regime – e.g. by making various demands that would require major, unacceptable South Korean and/or U.S. concessions. To reduce the chances of such behavior, the United States and South Korea would need to achieve significant, prior Chinese “buy-in” of the overall process, which would incentivize Beijing to work to prevent such North Korean behavior. None of this would be easy, but the alternatives to such a difficult path –i.e., the continued unsuccessful application of sanctions and extreme pressure on Pyongyang – are highly unlikely to roll back the North Korean nuclear program, given the past track record.



South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un shake hands at the truce village of Panmunjom inside the demilitarized zone separating the two Koreas, South Korea, April 27, 2018. (via Reuters).

The very long-term goal, subject to South Korean and Chinese agreement or acceptance, is to create a denuclearized, unified, militarily strong but formally

non-aligned Korean Peninsula free from foreign forces and security commitments to outside powers and enjoying good relations with both Beijing and Washington. That outcome would have the greatest chance of preventing a future Sino-U.S. conflict over the peninsula, and any worsening of Japan-Korea relations, under even the “sustained rivalry” scenario outlined below. But this goal can only be achieved if the North Korean regime either collapses or withers away from within, is soundly defeated in war, or undergoes a radical political transformation in a liberal direction. While the last alternative is virtually inconceivable under any time frame and the second would be devastating for all Koreans and might lead to a Sino-U.S. conflict, the first is possible, but only if Beijing were to accept such an outcome. This could occur under the “best case” strategy of improved Sino-U.S. relations.

- 8) Regarding maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, reaching understandings on the number and size of military and para-military deployments, exercises, and freedom of navigation operations on or around disputed land features, and a clear commitment by all disputants never to use force first against any other territorial claimants, nor to seek through military means to dislodge any rival claimant from held territories. Such agreements should lead to a reduction in the overall presence of military and paramilitary forces and provide a basis for a future stabilization of the region.

Among the first proposals leading into this process should be a joint U.S.-PRC declaration indicating that both countries are committed to assuring the unhindered peaceful transit of those vessels and aircraft throughout the area of the South China Sea and the East China Sea (including high seas, economic zones, and territorial waters where appropriate under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea or UNCLOS) that are engaged in regular commerce and other permitted activities under the UNCLOS treaty. And the United States should also consider, as a unilateral CBM, some reductions in the extremely high frequency of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and other military activities all along the Chinese coast. During this entire process, all

disputants should also work to reach agreements on joint economic development of maritime resources where possible.

With regard to the South China Sea, as and if Sino–U.S. relations improve significantly, Washington should consider quietly phasing out, or at least severely reducing all provocative military practices, in and around the area (including freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), as and if Beijing agrees to the understandings noted above.

- 9) The United States should suspend costly efforts aimed at modernizing its nuclear strike force, focusing instead on negotiating reductions in the size of existing nuclear arsenals and in preventing further WMD proliferation. This will require a strategic arms control agreement with China, Russia, and other nuclear powers, linked to an overarching concept of strategic stability involving the elimination of tactical nuclear weapons, restraints on both offensive and defensive ballistic and hypersonic missile systems, a common recognition of the reality of mutual deterrence, the continued reduction of the strategic nuclear weapons arsenal, and a U.S. no first use policy in the context of Washington’s extended deterrence commitments.

- 10) The creation of U.S. domestic policies to encourage and facilitate greater U.S. business involvement in East Asia, and increase U.S. engagement in multilateral economic and technological structures and fora in that region, including multilateral, inclusive, World Trade Organization (WTO)–compatible regional economic groupings such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans–Pacific Partnership, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the Belt and Road Initiative, etc. The United States should fold its proposed Indo–Pacific Economic Framework into these structures.

One key middle–term goal of great importance should also be the creation of an improved WTO with expanded and enforceable (to the extent possible) economic,

technology, and data norms and standards, and a reliable dispute mechanism. As part of this effort, Washington must vigilantly police instances of Chinese technology theft and copyright infringement, pressing the WTO to punish violators and persuading China that it has an overarching interest in respecting trade and technology norms. The ultimate objective of all these efforts should be a region-wide free trade agreement that also protects the economic interests of U.S. workers.

In order to create these preconditions for a stable, productive relationship with China, Beijing will obviously need to reciprocate in credible and substantive ways.

All this requires strong arguments showing the continued high benefits of deepened U.S. business engagement with China, and bipartisan domestic economic and technology policies that strike an optimal balance between free market and state regulated development, while reducing the growing inequality of wealth. This process should also include clear, well-grounded assessments of the huge financial and environmental costs for the United States and U.S. workers of: a) radical Sino-U.S. economic and technological decoupling; b) a continued reliance on high levels of (often inefficiently employed) defense spending that divert resources and innovation from other badly-needed uses such as fighting climate change; and c) the preservation of America's extensive network of overseas military bases. All of this should be done in close consultation with Asia's major middle powers, especially Japan, Singapore, India, South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, Australia, and Vietnam.

- 11) Forge multilateral data agreements and a federal data privacy law designed to strike the right balance between individual and governmental data privacy and control, with limits placed on inter-state data decoupling and national security-based standards for data access and control. This of course requires a

clear understanding of the huge costs and risks involved in the creation of a truly bifurcated cyber and data sphere.

- 12) Underwrite a comprehensive program of cultural and educational exchanges involving ordinary American and Chinese citizens. Over the long run, the best way to promote American-style freedom and liberal democratic norms is to allow others to experience and learn about them while providing a positive national image to the world, not to tear down other systems or seek to implant democracies abroad. Washington should also support the further expansion of U.S.-based universities in mainland China, expanding opportunities for young Chinese to acquire an American-style education, while encouraging Chinese students to come to the United States.
- 13) The United States should also maintain a robust schedule of mil-to-mil contacts with the PLA, to include student officer exchanges at U.S. and Chinese military schools.

In order to create these preconditions for a stable, productive relationship with China, Beijing will obviously need to reciprocate in credible and substantive ways, by affirming in words and deeds the above redefinition of national security (Point Two); engaging in meaningful dialogues with the United States and other Asian nations to reach understanding regarding the best way to deal with transnational threats and challenges (Point Three); showing restraint in responding to the U.S. deployment of the above-outlined active denial force posture (Point Four);⁶⁰ not actively opposing U.S. efforts to increase burden sharing among its allies and partners while supporting efforts to create a larger sphere of cooperative, positive-sum security interactions among all Asian states (Point Five); actively supporting tension-reducing efforts

⁶⁰ In many ways, Beijing has already created its own version of an active denial force posture in Asia, in order to eliminate the ability of any military power to operate freely within approximately 1500 km of its coast, and to counter U.S. intervention in a Taiwan conflict. Under this “best case” U.S. strategy, Beijing would retain that capability but not enhance it greatly to acquire assured “control” capabilities along the Asian littoral. In other words, the United States, Japan, and China would in effect create a kind of balance in capabilities based on sets of credible mutual denial capabilities.

regarding Taiwan, South Korea, and maritime disputes (Points Six through Eight); engaging meaningfully in strategic arms control talks on the basis of the principles mentioned above (Point Nine); reducing its violations or abuses of key trade, technology, and cyber/data standards (Points 10 and 11); and substantively supporting a robust program of cultural and educational exchanges with the United States (Point 12). Obviously, a Chinese refusal to reciprocate in most of these areas would likely spell the end of any “best case”-oriented U.S. strategy.

The “Sustained Rivalry” Strategy

Given the many challenges it faces, the above “best case” Restraint strategy might of course falter or fail, which would cause Sino-U.S. rivalry to continue to intensify, opportunities for greater cooperation to remain limited, and China’s economic and military power in Asia relative to the United States continue to grow at expected rates of anywhere from 3 to 6 percent. Under such conditions, in order to attain the above six broad Restraint goals, the United States will gradually need to adjust its implementation approach in some important ways.⁶¹ In particular, a scenario of continued rivalry and growing Chinese relative power in the region will necessitate a re-examination of some

⁶¹ Such a scenario of steady growing relative Chinese regional power could emerge regardless of whether China’s overall growth averages at the high or low end of this estimate. This is because even a relatively low average growth rate of around 3 percent is unlikely to force any major “guns versus butter” trade-offs for the Chinese leadership, especially since Beijing only spends approximately 2 percent of its GDP each year on the military and can withstand considerable social pressures to spend less. In other words, while this low growth scenario might force Beijing to slow the expansion of its military and economic presence outside Asia, it will probably not greatly affect the growth of its military capabilities and economic influence within the region. And this will especially prove true if the Chinese leadership views the United States as a continued or increasing regional threat, as this “Less Than Best” scenario assumes. Under such a condition, and even if China’s GDP does not surpass that of the United States., Beijing will likely tighten its belt in other areas to work even harder to counter U.S. influence in Asia. Such efforts will almost certainly focus on increasing China’s military capabilities relative to those of the United States along its entire maritime periphery. The scenario of prolonged, relatively high growth (at rates of five-seven percent per annum) assumes that China will be able to resolve or control most of its economic and social problems and eventually overtake and even perhaps double the U.S. GDP by mid-century. This is as likely to occur as the previous slow-growth scenario and of course would lead to even higher levels of Chinese influence than at present, not only along China’s maritime periphery, but also at greater distances from the Chinese mainland. But either scenario would present the United States with significant risks and challenges.

existing U.S. commitments and alliances, and the clear rejection of any dangerous and futile effort to retain security commitments that expose the United States to unnecessary dangers.

This approach would still incorporate many of the features of the best case approach outlined above, including: the abrogation of the Bush Doctrine; the continued, overriding need to cooperate with China in addressing climate change (and avoid sacrificing such efforts in a context of intensifying competition); and an even more urgent need to avoid nuclear war and to engage with China, allies and partners to create clear red lines and reach CBMs and understandings about key global economic and technological norms and limits on arms racing and militarization, especially regarding contentious issues such as Taiwan, maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, and cyber threats. This would also include maintaining a denial-oriented force posture in Asia but refocusing it primarily to deter aggression against Japan, deeper U.S. economic involvement in Asia, and nuclear restraint agreements.

The greatest shift that should occur under this scenario of continued Sino-U.S. rivalry alongside a rising China concerns the extent and function of U.S. alliances in the Asia Pacific, and U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Security alliances that pose more security risks than benefits over time should be gradually transformed over the coming decades into preferred partnerships that reduce Washington's security commitments while preserving American political and economic advantages.⁶² The U.S. alliances with Thailand and the Philippines are the most likely candidates for such a change, due to their now limited association with vital U.S. security interests and the near impossibility of any U.S. attempt to defend either country should China become an even more dominant power in the South China Sea. Of course, Manila might be of use to Washington as a base for U.S. military deployments in a Taiwan crisis or conflict. But any such U.S. intervention would be inadvisable under this future environment (as discussed below). In addition, the placement of sizeable U.S. forces on the Philippines before a Taiwan crisis or

⁶² We are indebted to Sarang Shidore for this concept and its application to some U.S. alliances. See Swaine and Shidore. "A Restraint Recipe for America's Asian Alliances and Partnerships."

conflict would also likely invite otherwise avoidable Chinese pressure on Manila, thus placing the United States in the near-impossible position of defending the Philippines against a superior Chinese force.

In contrast, the United States should sustain those alliances that remain essential to preserving regional peace and stability. These include America's alliances with Japan, first and foremost, and Australia. Remaining close to Japan is critical for several reasons. First, its industrial capacity and extensive trade and investment ties to the region make it an important anchor for stability. Second, its central geostrategic location close to China, the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and Russia, and its history of conflict with these (and other Asian) states place an imperative on preventing Japan from posing a threat to them by developing nuclear weapons or truly major conventional naval and air capabilities. Such adverse developments could be avoided if the alliance with the United States were continued, and strengthened in some significant ways under this scenario. Finally, the long history of close and friendly U.S. relations with Japan since World War Two and the similar political systems of the two nations provide a strong basis for policy coordination in dealing with China and Russia.

It will also be advisable to maintain the alliance with Australia. Both countries are enthusiastically in favor of continuing the alliance. Australia's remote geographic location and limited military and economic capabilities mean that continuing the U.S.–Australia alliance would not expose Washington to undue risk in its ongoing rivalry with a regionally much stronger Beijing. If necessary, Australia could act as a backstop for some U.S. forces deployed in an offshore role.

South Korea would be a more complex challenge, given its pivotal location in Northeast Asia, the history of close U.S.–ROK relations, the troubled South Korean–Japanese relationship, and the threat from North Korea. Under these circumstances, and in the context of deepening Sino–U.S. rivalry and growing relative Chinese military power, any U.S. attempt to drastically reduce (much less end) the U.S.–ROK security relationship over the short term would alarm both Seoul and Tokyo and could cause them to engage

in an aggressive arms buildup, possibly to the point of acquiring nuclear weapons. Seoul, and perhaps even Japan, could tilt toward Beijing, thereby also raising tensions with Tokyo or the United States.



South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un shake hands at the truce village of Panmunjom inside the demilitarized zone separating the two Koreas, South Korea, April 27, 2018. (via Reuters).

Under this scenario, the United States should for the foreseeable future maintain its alliance with and defense assistance to South Korea in order to avert war, while still supporting the development of a peace regime on the peninsula and in general working to prevent events in South Korea from exacerbating the Sino–U.S. rivalry. Indeed, Washington’s ongoing need to create stabilizing red lines and CBMs with Beijing and to lower the level of bilateral tensions would suggest the need to defuse the Korea situation as much as possible under this scenario.

The best way to do this would be for South Korea to build up its defense capabilities, with U.S. assistance, while reducing U.S. military presence and posture on the peninsula even as the United States maintains its extended deterrence commitment. This would include not only major reductions in U.S. ground forces, but also the abrogation of the U.N. command structure and the handing over of South Korean defense entirely to Seoul. Over time, this would lead to a more independent and confident South Korea that is both receptive to the reduced U.S. military presence and yet able to deter Pyongyang while avoiding provoking Beijing.

The U.S. relationship with Taiwan under this scenario would be especially challenging and is discussed in greater detail in the appendix. A much stronger, more adversarial China could become less patient regarding unification, especially if the Taiwanese continue to oppose any type of political talks with Beijing while the Kuomintang (Nationalist) party remains relatively weak and unable to convince the voters to uphold some variant of a One China policy. From a purely strategic, cost–benefit perspective, *ceteris paribus*, it would make little sense for the United States to intervene with military force in a Taiwan contingency (with possible escalation to nuclear war) if, as is likely under this scenario, the U.S. ability to successfully defeat a much stronger, determined, and adversarial China was very much in doubt.⁶³

That said, entirely ending even the existing, limited U.S. commitment to Taiwan would almost certainly create a huge, politically–fatal domestic crisis for any U.S. administration and severely damage Washington’s relations with Tokyo and other allies. The likely costs and uncertainties of such a move make it vital for the United States to develop a strategy for providing continued, extensive support for Taiwan short of

⁶³ Goldstein, Lyle. “We Shouldn’t Underestimate the Incredible Danger Posed by the Taiwan Crisis.” *Jacobin*, August 6, 2022. <https://jacobin.com/2022/08/us-china-taiwan-crisis-pelosi-visit-nuclear-war>; Glaser, Charles. “Washington Is Avoiding the Tough Questions on Taiwan and China.” *Foreign Affairs*, April 28, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-04-28/washington-avoiding-tough-questions-taiwan-and-china>; Bandow, Doug. “Should We Go to War for Taiwan?” *American Conservative*, April 15, 2021. <https://www.cato.org/commentary/should-we-go-war-taiwan>.

engaging in direct warfare with Beijing over the island. This strategy is outlined in the appendix.

Even in this scenario of deepening rivalry, the United States should continue to seek cooperation with China on issues critical and existential to its interests and that of the international system. These include nuclear stability, climate change, and global health.

Finally, any of the above adjustments in U.S. alliances and Taiwan policy should be phased in over several decades, and in a manner that fully engages allies and partners. Equally important, even in this scenario of deepening rivalry, the United States should continue to seek cooperation with China on issues critical and existential to its interests and that of the international system. These include nuclear stability, climate change, and global health. Such a thinner level of cooperation under rivalry is certainly possible, as was demonstrated by U.S.–Soviet understandings on non–proliferation and arms control during the Cold War.

Clearly, the preferred Restraint scenario is the “Best Case” strategy. However, even the “Sustained Rivalry” Restraint strategy would be better than the current strategies under discussion in Washington, which include largely futile efforts to sustain the disappearing status quo in global and Asian power distribution, centered on a continued, dominant U.S. global military presence and “security guarantor” role, and the existing structure and function of the U.S. alliance systems. In Asia, this dominance–based strategy includes a greatly expanded U.S. forward presence and commitments to defending an excessive set of interests and territories, which greatly raise the chances of an armed clash with China without providing assured deterrence.

Offshore Balancing: A Distant Goal at Best

In contrast to the two preceding Restraint approaches, another approach is to significantly reduce, if not end, forward deployed U.S. forces all along the Asian littoral. This perspective can be viewed as an essential part of a transition to an “offshore balancing” role in which the United States has no formal security obligations to any Asian nation but provides assistance selectively and remains capable of deploying into the region if necessary, to prevent or resolve conflict.⁶⁴ This posture would arguably: (a) give the United States a free hand to act only when its interests are truly imperiled, (b) incentivize much stronger levels of local counterbalancing (with U.S. assistance), and (c) limit the intensity of Sino–U.S. competition to the extent possible, to preserve the possibility of ad hoc cooperation on issues of common interest (e.g., environment and trade). In such an effort, the United States would probably need to accept some loss of influence over traditional partners such as Japan, but would also work to craft diplomatic–military understandings with Beijing, Japan, and others in order to reduce friction and the potential for crises.

Such a fundamental transformation of the U.S. security role in Asia would obviously require the abrogation or radical restructuring of existing U.S. alliances and the emergence of a much more stable Taiwan situation of the sort outlined in the above “best case” scenario, both of which assume a much less confrontational, zero–sum Sino-U.S. relationship. Without those prior changes, it is very possible that a shift toward offshore balancing could push Japan toward acquiring nuclear weapons, which would likely cause South Korea to do the same, especially if North Korea were still in possession of nuclear weapons. Alternatively, such a shift could prompt Tokyo and/or Seoul to align with Beijing, to uncertain ends. In other words, any unprepared, precipitate

⁶⁴ Mearsheimer, John and Stephen Walt. “The Case for Offshore Balancing.” *Foreign Affairs*, June 13, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>; Posen, Barry R. *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*; Layne, Christopher. “China’s Role in American Grand Strategy: Partner, Regional Power, or Great Power Rival?” In *The Asia-Pacific A Region in Transition*, ed. Jim Rolfe, 54-80. Asia–Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004. <https://dkiapcss.edu/Publications/Edited%20Volumes/RegionalFinal%20chapters/Chapter5Layne.pdf>.

shift away from the U.S. alliance structure entirely would generate extreme levels of uncertainty, tension, and hence instability, increasing the likelihood of nations taking such extreme measures to compensate for the loss of the nearby American military presence. And any such rapid shift would also undoubtedly produce enormous domestic political repercussions in the United States.

For some observers, nuclear proliferation in Asia would be an acceptable, even perhaps inevitable and beneficial, outcome for the region, since all major nuclear-armed nations would presumably be deterred from attacking one another. However, a nuclear-armed Asia would involve enormous risks, in at least two ways. Movement toward the acquisition of nuclear weapons could prompt preemptive attacks or other coercive pressures from potential adversaries. Second, there is no guarantee that a nuclear-armed Asia would be more stable; to the contrary, nuclear-armed powers might feel more secure to undertake limited conventional military moves against one another to resolve or stabilize disputes, the so-called stability-instability paradox.⁶⁵

There is no guarantee that a nuclear-armed Asia would be more stable; to the contrary, nuclear-armed powers might feel more secure to undertake limited conventional military moves against one another to resolve or stabilize disputes.

A more responsible Restraint stance would aim at reducing, not intensifying, such risk-taking and security competition across the region. As noted above, the medium to long-term objective of a responsible Restraint stance should be peaceful but mutually beneficial coexistence, more cooperative security relations with a major focus on

⁶⁵ Snyder, Glenn. "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror." In *The Balance of Power*, ed. Paul Seabury, 1965.; Jervis, Robert. "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter." *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979): 617-33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149629>.

dealing with common threats, balance over dominance, and more integrated, interdependent region–wide economic relations. Although an end to U.S. alliances and the transition to an offshore balancing stance might be possible and beneficial over the long term, it should only occur as the consequence of those other changes designed to reduce regional security competition and any contest for dominance.

Conclusion

In none of the above areas central to a U.S. Restraint strategy should the United States assume that China’s intentions are benign or that understandings can be reached without some compromise and risk–taking by both sides. Each country will need to show through repeated actions and not mere words that it is committed to a stable and secure global and Asian environment based on balance, not dominance, pragmatic not ideological standards, and greater overall levels of economic integration, not opposing economic blocs.

In none of the areas central to a U.S. Restraint strategy should the United States assume that China’s intentions are benign or that understandings can be reached without some compromise and risk–taking by both sides. Each country will need to show through repeated actions and not mere words that it is committed to a stable and secure global and Asian environment.

For this to happen, each nation must first recognize the greater dangers that any alternative to such an environment would pose, a recognition that is not currently evident in either Beijing or Washington. Assuming that China continues to grow at levels

sufficient to sustain its expanding economic, military, and technological influence in the world, efforts by the United States to maintain its existing security commitments across East Asia, absent a clear Chinese acceptance of those commitments, will become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to achieve and will more likely generate severe crises than sustain a stable regional order. Some kind of stable equilibrium, based on a mixture of credible levels of deterrence and reassurance, alongside more positive-sum efforts to combat common threats, will prove more feasible, beneficial, and safe than will any doubling down on military deterrence and the formation of zero-sum, confrontational blocs, especially in Asia.

The United States is no longer capable of enforcing stability across most of the globe through the exercise of dominant economic and military power and political/ideological values. The world has become a far more complex, interdependent, multipolar place, with virtually all nations holding a large array of cross-cutting interests regarding trade, finance, technology, and social and political values. This makes it virtually impossible to create coherent, clearly-defined, and sustainable, U.S. (or Chinese)-led blocs of nations committed to countering other blocs of nations in largely zero-sum ways. The common desire of most states is and will remain to hedge and equivocate in supporting or opposing any U.S. or Chinese zero-sum goals across the board. It is very unlikely that either Beijing or Washington will possess the capability to overcome this structural feature of the 21st-century environment, absent a paradigm-shifting war between them that forces nations to choose sides, a conflict that neither desires nor is certain of winning.

Equally important, a deepening level of Sino-U.S. strategic rivalry marked by zero-sum, worst-case assumptions and policies will not only increase the chance of conflict, but also severely undermine the ability of all nations to cooperate in combating the primary challenge of climate change, as well as the high possibility of future pandemics, global financial disarray, and WMD proliferation. These challenges cannot be treated as lesser included concerns subordinate to a so-called "great power competition." Simply put, the

stakes involved in handling them exceed those presented by such a competition, and a worsening Sino–U.S. rivalry will inevitably obstruct meaningful attempts to develop the technologies, trade and investment relationships, and new multinational fora or structures necessary to meet them. The United States needs to stabilize its relationship with Beijing in constructive ways to best serve its primary interests.

It is always possible that either the United States or China could deteriorate internally to such a degree that the other is able to achieve a credible level of dominance to sustain or reorder the global system in its favor. But the possibility of such a momentous shift is not sufficiently high to serve as the guiding assumption driving U.S. policies. Moreover, Washington can both effectively meet the challenges posed by China and avert its own decline by focusing on correcting its domestic political, economic, and social problems as a top priority. Failing to do so will simply increase the likelihood of conflict with China and obstruct efforts to address the most urgent threats facing the nation.

Appendix: The Taiwan Challenge

It will prove impossible to adopt a more positive–sum set of Sino–U.S. relations in Asia and reduce the propensity toward arms racing, a competition for dominance, and the worst casing of intentions without stabilizing the Taiwan issue. It presents the most serious danger to regional and even possibly global stability and peace. This is particularly true because the island is increasingly viewed as a test of resolve between the United States and China in a larger strategic competition for Asian dominance. For an arguably growing number of American policy experts and politicians, China is seen as committed to militarily seizing Taiwan as a first step in a larger effort to militarily intimidate or even attack nearby states. For a growing number of Chinese, the United States is seen as committed to keeping Taiwan separate from China and eventually using the island as a strategic location for tightening the containment of China and undermining the PRC regime.

As a result, many observers on both sides are coming to believe that only increased levels of military deterrence, with little if any credible reassurances toward each other's security interests, are necessary to maintain stability across the Taiwan Strait. This serves to preclude any positive-sum outcomes and hardens overall views against various forms of broader bilateral cooperation. Given these trends, and the high stakes involved for both sides, a major U.S.–China conflict over Taiwan is arguably becoming more likely.

A more pragmatic Restraint approach toward Taiwan over at least the near to medium term would focus on reducing tensions in the overall Sino-U.S. relationship while creating conditions that encourage Beijing to continue exercising restraint toward the island.

One way to credibly defuse the Taiwan issue and stabilize the region would be for the United States to gradually reduce its support for the island to the point where Washington is no longer inclined to intervene militarily in a China–Taiwan conflict. Doing this would greatly reduce the chance of a direct Sino–U.S. conflict and encourage Taiwan either to seriously move to defend itself or compromise with Beijing in achieving a durable political settlement of the issue. Yet such a U.S. approach confronts major difficulties as a near to medium term policy, although is advisable over the long term, albeit under the right conditions (see below). In the current, deepening overall Sino–U.S. confrontation, such a move would generate huge domestic political resistance in the United States and quite possibly severely shake the confidence of Japan (and perhaps South Korea) in the U.S. security commitment to them, and of course would undoubtedly panic Taiwan. It could also encourage China to increase coercive pressure on Taiwan or possibly even precipitate a Chinese attack on the island, if Beijing were to

fear Taiwan acquiring a nuclear weapon as a result of the U.S. drastically reducing its support for the island.

Therefore, a more pragmatic Restraint approach toward Taiwan over at least the near to medium term would focus on reducing tensions in the overall Sino-U.S. relationship while creating conditions that encourage Beijing to continue exercising restraint toward the island. In this regard, fears that China is preparing to imminently invade Taiwan are unconvincing. A Chinese capacity to invade and hold Taiwan with a high chance of success is not currently evident and unlikely to emerge in the foreseeable future, given continued U.S. force improvements and the continued high economic and political costs of a Chinese decision to attack the island without a clear provocation (most likely in the form of U.S. backing for Taiwan independence). Moreover, as noted earlier, the lessons of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and particularly Russia's failures in Ukraine reinforce for Beijing the difficulties of invasion.

Rather than act on the fear of a likely Chinese attack on Taiwan (a fear that can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy), a more responsible Restraint position toward Taiwan over at least the medium term (i.e., to around 2035) would focus on two critical elements. The first is reversing the current erosion of and injecting much greater credibility into the U.S. One China policy by:

- Explicitly rejecting the notion that Taiwan must be regarded as a critical strategic node essential to the defense of the entire first island chain and thus kept separate from China.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Colby. *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*; Ratner, Ely. "The Future of U.S. Policy on Taiwan." Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 8, 2021. https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821_Ratner_Testimony1.pdf; Swaine, Michael D. "US official signals stunning shift in the way we interpret 'One China' policy." *Responsible Statecraft*, December 10, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/10/us-official-signals-stunning-shift-in-the-way-we-interpret-on-e-china-policy/>; Heer, Paul. "Has Washington's Policy Toward Taiwan Crossed the Rubicon?" *The National Interest*, December 10, 2021. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/has-washington%E2%80%99s-policy-toward-taiwan-crossed-rubicon-197877?page=0%2C1>.

- Ending U.S. efforts to get Japan and South Korea to commit in advance to supporting the United States in a conflict with China over Taiwan (a move that would produce significant turmoil in both countries, greatly undermine Sino–Japanese and Sino–South Korean relations, in general deepen China’s reliance on military deterrence, and remove any leverage that Tokyo and Seoul might have in persuading Washington to improve relations with Beijing).
- Resisting the temptation to regard China’s stance toward Taiwan as similar to Russia’s stance toward Ukraine, by recognizing that Beijing will not undertake the huge risks involved in trying to seize and hold the island (over at least the medium term) as long as Washington does not move toward creating de facto, alliance–style defense and diplomatic relations with the island.
- Ending efforts to actively discourage Taiwan’s remaining diplomatic partners from shifting their recognition to Beijing and other actions that show clear support for features of an independent Taiwan.

The second element of a Restraint policy toward Taiwan over at least the medium term involves efforts to implement those components of the responsible Restraint approach described in this paper, focusing on reducing the salience in U.S. policy of those factors driving overall Sino–U.S. hostility by:

- Working to end the hostile, confrontational, zero–sum rhetoric on both sides.
- Engaging more actively with China in efforts to reach understandings, set clear red lines, and enhance cooperation and construct CBMs in the key areas of bilateral and multilateral economic and technology relations, climate change, pandemics, WMD proliferation, maritime security, and other types of common threats or concerns.

- Redefining the U.S. security alliances to support such reassurance activities, rather than focusing solely on military deterrence efforts directed at Beijing and Pyongyang.

Over the long term, such “best case” policies should create greater incentives on all sides to compromise in their approach to the ultimate status and importance of Taiwan within the region and to each player, and thus are strongly preferred. This could involve tacit or explicit understandings of Beijing’s willingness to reduce military deployments aimed at increasing its capacity to launch a direct attack on the island, in exchange for a gradual reduction in U.S. arms sales and defense ties with Taipei.⁶⁷ However, to maintain stability in the Taiwan Strait, any such U.S. reductions should also be accompanied by efforts to increase the effectiveness of economic, technological, political, diplomatic, and other non–military deterrence actions toward Beijing. And over time, China would likely need to provide an alternative to the “one country, two systems” formula or redefine it in ways that allow for a high level of real and sustained Taiwanese autonomy. This might take the form of a commonwealth or confederation–like relationship of close association, but probably not under a single sovereign authority, at least for some considerable time.

For its part, Taiwan would need to accept such a relationship with Beijing and work with the mainland to develop overall confidence–building foreign and defense policies, including those that do not involve placing PRC diplomatic or military personnel on the island. For this to happen, Beijing would also need to reduce its level of domestic repression and provide greater social and economic benefits and security assurances to Taiwan. While not acting as a formal intermediary, the United States should encourage and facilitate greater cross–Strait dialogue along these lines.

⁶⁷ Swaine, Michael D. “Ending the Destructive Sino-U.S. Interaction Over Taiwan: A Call for Mutual Reassurance.” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, October 24, 2022. <https://quincyst.org/report/ending-the-destructive-sino-u-s-interaction-over-taiwan-a-call-for-mutual-reassurance/>.



A pilot is seen inside a cockpit of an F-16V jet fighter taxis on the runway for an emergency takeoff training at the Air Force base, as the Taiwanese military holds a drill for preparedness enhancement ahead of the Chinese New Year, January 5, 2022 (via reuters.com).

Under the scenario of sustained and deepening Sino–U.S. rivalry and continued high (and possibly accelerated) levels of Chinese defense spending, China’s military and economic power and influence could become virtually overwhelming along at least the first island chain. If this were to occur, the United States (and Japan) would be extremely hard–pressed to maintain any credible conventional military deterrent against a Chinese attack. And any attempt by the United States to compensate for this deficiency in conventional military power by providing Taiwan with nuclear weapons or placing it under the U.S. nuclear umbrella would guarantee a major conflict with China. This would be especially true if a stronger China were to view the overall military, political, and economic risks involved in resolving the issue by conventional force as manageable.

Under such a situation, it would make the greatest sense for the United States to continue upholding (and indeed strengthening the credibility of) its One China policy along with the concern for Taiwan's security expressed under the Taiwan Relations Act and other policy statements, but to eventually end any intention to engage U.S. forces directly in the defense of Taiwan. Such direct U.S. military intervention, against a China that possessed nearly overwhelming military capabilities toward Taiwan, would almost certainly prove disastrous for all concerned, and could escalate to the level of nuclear conflict. However, a U.S. decision not to intervene directly in a Taiwan conflict would not constitute abandonment of the island. Under this scenario, the United States would still undertake an array of enhanced deterrent measures against China, including greater defense assistance to the island. But Taiwan would also need to do much more on its own to strengthen its own defense.

Equally important, Washington would also need to lay the groundwork for ending the possibility of any direct use of U.S. forces in the defense of Taiwan, while supporting Taiwan in every other way possible. Before dropping the option of directly intervening in a China–Taiwan conflict, Washington should consult fully with Japan and South Korea and do all it can to safeguard their security and sustain their support. This most likely requires significant prior strengthening of Taiwanese, Japanese and most likely South Korean and Australian security, with U.S. assistance, along with other forms of credible U.S. reassurance to all of them.

Such an effort would almost certainly require increasing the U.S. conventional military presence in Japan (and possibly Australia as well) and a tightening of the existing bilateral alliances with both countries. It would also require increasing significantly U.S. military assistance to non–ally Taiwan (in the form of weapons, equipment, and training), as noted above.

Augmenting South Korea's security would not necessarily require the continuation of the U.S. force presence on the Korean Peninsula over the long term. Indeed, under this scenario, South Korea might decide that taking full control of its own security by ending

the U.N. Command structure and U.S. force presence, enhancing and consolidating its own capabilities and command over its forces, yet continuing to receive defense assistance from the United States would best ensure its own security while reducing the possibility of provoking Beijing. If so, the United States (and Japan) should accept such a decision, as long as it did not involve Seoul developing nuclear weapons, an action that could then likely cause Japan to move in a similar fashion, given the troubled relationship between the two nations.

It is of course possible that a non-nuclear South Korea would prefer an extended U.S. force presence on the Korean peninsula to deal with a much stronger China and a still-threatening North Korea. In such a case, as noted in the discussion of the “Sustained Rivalry” scenario, the United States should work with South Korea to create the conditions for eventually reducing the U.S. force presence and posture on the peninsula by continuously helping Seoul to build up its defense capabilities. As with Taiwan, the U.S. objective should be to greatly increase Seoul’s ability to defend itself, although in this instance Washington would retain its formal security commitment in order to protect South Korea against a nuclear-armed Pyongyang.

As the above suggests, preserving a stable regional (and global) security environment under both the “best case” and “Sustained Rivalry” scenarios would almost certainly require continued efforts to prevent further nuclear proliferation in Asia. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by Tokyo and Seoul would greatly damage the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and open the door to other nations acquiring nuclear weapons. Such proliferation, especially if it were to include less stable nations, could increase the chance of miscalculation in a political-military crisis, possibly leading to an accidental nuclear war. Equally ominous, the possession of nuclear weapons by rival states could lead them to become more risk-acceptant in threatening or even using conventional weapons, as mentioned above.

Thus, even though the chances of a major Sino-U.S. war would likely drop significantly if the United States were to preclude any intention to directly intervene militarily in a

future China–Taiwan conflict, a new set of uncertainties and dangers would likely emerge if any such U.S. action caused Tokyo, Seoul, Taiwan, or any other Asian power to acquire nuclear weapons or otherwise act in destabilizing ways. Avoiding such new dangers should therefore be regarded as a vital U.S. interest, possibly equal to that of avoiding a major conflict with China over Taiwan. This is the greatest reason why any ending of a U.S. intention to intervene militarily in a China–Taiwan conflict must be preceded by many years, and perhaps decades, of U.S. efforts to provide credible assurances to U.S. allies and Taiwan that, as and if China’s power continues to grow and Beijing becomes more assertive, Washington will work closely with them to strengthen their security, regardless of how the Taiwan situation evolves.

These reassurance efforts should prove fairly easy under the first “best case” scenario of deepening accommodation and cooperation among all Asian powers, including China. Indeed, that scenario envisions a gradual, safe reduction of even the limited current U.S. defense commitment to Taiwan. However, doing so under the second scenario of deepening Sino–U.S. rivalry will undoubtedly prove significantly more challenging. Nonetheless, such a reduction would be possible, through deft diplomacy with all parties (including many cumulative positive interactions between the United States and China, and with other key nations such as Japan), as well as enhanced security assistance to U.S. allies and partners.

Some might argue that, under conditions of growing Sino–U.S. rivalry, a U.S. decision not to intervene directly in a China–Taiwan conflict would simply embolden Beijing to attack Taiwan. Given this danger, others might argue that the United States should not openly declare that it will not intervene, keep to its existing Taiwan policy, and simply decide not to directly engage with Chinese forces if deterrence and reassurance were to fail and a conflict emerge. On the first point, if the United States were to inject more credibility into its One China policy (as called for above) while continuing to assist Taiwan militarily, getting Taipei to do much more for itself, and strengthening its overall economic, political, and diplomatic clout in Asia and toward Beijing, the cost to China of

initiating a military conflict over Taiwan would still remain very high. But ultimately, as noted above, the responsibility to defend Taiwan militarily in a future conflict should rest predominantly with Taipei, especially under the “Sustained Rivalry” scenario, given the huge risks and potential costs of a direct U.S. military conflict under such circumstances. On the second point, it is hard to see how the United States could conceal a decision not to intervene in a Taiwan crisis while working to protect against the possible severe blowback that would result from such an eventual decision as argued above. Any serious consideration of the option of not intervening would need to involve many members of the U.S. government and would inevitably leak. In other words, a “stealth” policy of U.S. non-intervention is unrealistic.

Finally, any major shifts in U.S. strategy toward China, especially dropping any intention to directly intervene militarily in a Taiwan conflict under the scenario of deepening rivalry with a much stronger China would obviously also require the assent or at least acquiescence of the leaders of both major political parties. This could only occur if a U.S. administration, and probably successive administrations, were able to present a convincing case that such shifts would be more beneficial to U.S. interests than the vastly more dangerous alternatives. Such a case could certainly be made, as the analysis presented in this paper shows.

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