

## **CONFLICT AND COOPERATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION: A STRATEGIC NET ASSESSMENT**

**MICHAEL D. SWAINE, NICHOLAS EBERSTADT, M. TAYLOR FRAVEL, MIKKAL HERBERG, ALBERT KEIDEL, EVANS J. R. REVERE, ALAN D. ROMBERG, ELEANOR FREUND, RACHEL ESPLIN ODELL, AND AUDRYE WONG**

The Asia-Pacific region is undergoing enormous change, fueled by high levels of economic growth and deepening levels of integration. These and other forces are generating a shift in the distribution of economic, political, and military power across the region. This changing security environment poses a major challenge for the United States, the historically dominant power in maritime Asia. Efforts to enhance regional cooperation, reassure allies, and deter and shape potentially destabilizing behavior are demanding a more complex mixture of U.S. skills and understanding. An array of current and likely long-term forces will drive both cooperation and conflict across the Asia-Pacific region.

### **Key Findings**

There are five different security environments that could emerge in the Asia-Pacific region over the next twenty-five years (in order of likelihood):

1. Status Quo Redux: Constrained economic and political competition alongside continuing cooperation
2. Asia-Pacific Cold War: Deepening regional bipolarization and militarization, driven by a worsening U.S.-China strategic and economic rivalry
3. Pacific Asia-Pacific: Reduced tension and increased U.S.-China and regional cooperation
4. Asian Hot Wars: Episodic but fairly frequent military conflict in critical hot spots, emerging against a cold war backdrop
5. Challenged Region: A region beset by social, economic, and political instability and unrest separate from U.S.-China competition

### **Risks in the Evolving Security Environment**

- The primary risk: movement toward the conflictual side of the Status Quo Redux security environment due to an uncertain pattern of economic, political, and military multipolarity and a divergence in opinion concerning the proper distribution of power
- A shift in resources toward security competition
- Increased tests of resolve and political-military crises
- A United States embroiled in third-party disputes
- Greater challenges to the U.S. alliance system

### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Michael D. Swaine**  
Carnegie Endowment

**Nicholas Eberstadt**  
American Enterprise Institute  
National Bureau of Asian Research

**M. Taylor Fravel**  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

**Mikkal Herberg**  
National Bureau of Asian Research  
University of California, San Diego

**Albert Keidel**  
Atlantic Council  
Georgetown University

**Evans J. R. Revere**  
Brookings Institution  
Albright Stonebridge Group

**Alan D. Romberg**  
Stimson Center

**Eleanor Freund**  
Carnegie Endowment

**Rachel Esplin Odell**  
Carnegie Endowment (2010–2014)  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

**Audrye Wong**  
Carnegie Endowment (2013–2014)  
Princeton University

- Exclusionary political and economic arrangements
- Domestic instability and regime collapse in North Korea
- Domestic instability and ultranationalism in China
- U.S. miscalculations in response to a more assertive China

## Factors That Could Restrain or Eliminate Risks

- Common support for sustaining economic growth
- The absence of existential disputes
- Enduring U.S. strength
- The possibility of a more flexible China
- Cooperation in dealing with North Korea
- Collaboration in addressing transnational threats

## Steps the United States Can Take to Avert Conflict

**Identify U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific.** U.S. agencies should identify the United States' long-term primary, secondary, and tertiary strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific.

**Conduct an unprecedented U.S.-China strategic dialogue.** An ongoing, government-supported but unofficial track 2 effort could eventually feed into a more formal track 1.5 dialogue in the military and diplomatic realms.

**Undertake a range of strategic assurances between the United States and China.** A variety of specific reciprocal and joint actions should be considered as near- to medium-term initiatives to provide greater strategic reassurance between Washington and Beijing.

**Clarify and strengthen the U.S. position on maritime disputes.** In the South China Sea, Washington should encourage all sides to lower the perceived value of the disputed islands by delineating joint fishing, hydrocarbon, seabed minerals, and environmental protection zones. The United States should also encourage the disputants to enhance crisis management.

**Coordinate a force for sea lines of communication (SLOC) defense.** Washington should undertake a sustained effort to establish a joint maritime force involving the United States, China, and other Asian states in SLOC defense.

**Provide greater support for crisis management mechanisms.** These mechanisms could help avert or manage future political-military crises over maritime territorial disputes and other contentious issues.

**Establish a forum for the discussion of energy security issues.** Such a forum would be a vital channel for addressing tensions over the control of energy resources and transportation routes in the region.

**Strengthen engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and with individual member states.** The United States should promote a U.S.-ASEAN free trade agreement and strengthen ASEAN institutions by endorsing their role as action-oriented bodies that are able to tackle regional issues.

### CONTACT

Christopher Dockrey  
Government Affairs Manager  
+1 202 939-2307  
cdockrey@ceip.org

Clara Hogan  
Media Manager  
+1 202 939-2241  
chogan@ceip.org

### CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

*The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.*

© 2015 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

*The Carnegie Endowment does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.*

[CarnegieEndowment.org](http://CarnegieEndowment.org)



@CarnegieEndow



facebook.com/  
CarnegieEndowment