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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Michael Swaine**

Episode 20: The U.S.-Japan Alliance in East Asia
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Haenle: You are listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World Podcast,” a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China’s foreign policy, international role, and China’s relations with the world, brought to you by the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center located here in Beijing. I’m Paul Haenle, the director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I’ll be your host.

Today I’m delighted to be joined by my colleague, Michael Swaine, senior associate of Carnegie’s Asia Program in Washington, D.C. and one of the most prominent American analysts on the topic of Chinese security studies. Michael we are thrilled to have you here with us today to discuss territorial disputes in the East China Sea and U.S.-China interactions in the Asia Pacific. Thank you for joining us.

Swaine: You welcome Paul; glad to be here.

Haenle: Last year you completed the first comprehensive assessment of the current and possible future impact of China’s military capabilities and foreign security policies on Tokyo and the U.S.-Japan alliance, along with an examination of the capacity and willingness of the United States and Japan to respond to this challenge. Your conclusion was that the most likely potential challenge to the U.S.-Japan Alliance over the next 15 to 20 years does not involve full scale military conflict between Japan and China or the United States. Have developments since the report was completed, including the continued deterioration in relations between China and Japan, changed your assessment of the risks of clash between these actors.

Swaine: Well, thank you Paul. We completed that study at the end of last year and it was a multi-link, multi-year study with a lot of different moving parts to it trying to assess the different possibilities in the region and Northeast Asia in particular emerging from China’s military modernization. You are right, we did not conclude that the issue here is one of war or peace. I don’t think that has changed one bit in the interim since that report appeared because the main reason that we gave for that conclusion was that there is nothing other than the possibility of an inadvertent escalation of a crisis that could occur—I mean that’s always possible, some kind of incident or accidental collision or other type of behavior that could provoke escalation on one side or the other—barring that escalation [changing] into something really large scale, which I think is highly unlikely. I don’t think the dynamics of escalation are such that you would get movement up to the point of really wide spread conflict. So, you are talking about a narrow range of possibilities. Neither country really wants to see military conflict. That’s not their objective...

Haenle: Neither country meaning Japan and China?

Swaine: Japan and China, right. Certainly not the United States. The fear I think is of inadvertent conflict coming from a crisis or some kind of an incident. But, even under those conditions, I think both sides, including the United States, would try mightily to try to resist any kind of escalation that would occur in those kinds of circumstances. So, what we are dealing with really is a situation where there is a sort of nationalist agenda that both countries are operating under. These issues, the East China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, are front and center in that dynamic. Neither side, for domestic and political reasons in part and for some concerns for the uncertainties of the future, is willing to back away or back down or basically diffuse the situation. So, you are in an environment here where certainly you could have something unfortunate happen, but for any

country to deliberately chose to escalate this to the point of major conflict I think is totally, totally unlikely and very remote.

Haenle: So in addition to an inadvertent clash which you mentioned, what are some of the other likely challenges to the U.S.-Japan alliance over the next 15 to 20 years that you identified in your report and how did you lay out, in terms of recommendations, U.S. and Japanese policy-makers best response to these challenges?

Swaine: Well, I think, from a broader perspectives, one of the real challenges is to strike the right balance in the alliance between improving the ability of the two countries to anticipate and respond to crisis of one sort or another—whether it be a North Korean Crisis or one to do with China—and to better understand what are the likely possibilities and how the two sides could well respond in dealing with that sort of situation without, however, making it appear that both are preparing for such a conflict or that they are, in some way, anticipating or assuming that such a conflict is going to occur. [This] would, of course, provoke the Chinese to thinking that this is part of a larger containment type of behavior and a militarization, if you will, of Northeast Asia. Getting that balance right in the relationship is a very important thing. It's not just a question of military relations between Japan and the United States; it's a question of the overall relationship that both countries have not just with each other but with the region. On the Japanese side, you have a country that is now certainly not in the best of economic conditions. It has a lot of constraints, demographic and otherwise, for its long term development. It has inherent limitations on how much it can develop its own military capabilities. So expectations, I think, have to be accurate in understanding where Japan is going and what it can do. On the other hand, Japan is not about to become a militarized power the way that China often says or implies that it is involved in moving in that direction. I think that is fundamental distortion of Japan's situation today. So the real problem is how do you get Japan to play as a more responsible, more active player within the region, particularly in the security realm, in way that is realistic and in a way that doesn't appear to be in one sense provoking the situation there.

Haenle: So let me ask you about that because you and I met today with a number of Chinese scholars talking primarily about regional issues and the U.S.-Japan alliance was a big factor in that. Is it possible to strike the right balance in a way that convinces Chinese leaders and Chinese experts that we have the right balance because you talked about the distortion of these Japan militarization issues. We also hear a distortion on what U.S. policy actually is when it comes to Japan. I left our discussion today wondering whether it's even possible to strike the right balance; will the perception in China always be that we have strike the right balance, that we are provoking the situation through Japan.

Swaine: Well, I think you are right Paul. To some extent, you can never satisfy the Chinese. They always see more of a unified and coordinated policy on the part of Washington and Tokyo than are really there. Certainly, much more... they often over emphasize the degree to which they think policies are driven by them and a concern about them as opposed to a general desire to strengthen an alliance that is seen by both Tokyo and Washington as a stabilizing force in the region; not for negative reasons of counterbalancing China but simply because it acts as a stabilizer [by] providing the United States with access to region [and] for ensuring others that Japan is closely tied to the United States. So, for all those reasons, I think that people look upon that as an

important thing. Nonetheless, I do think that more could be done by the United States in particular. Part of the problem, of course, is that China itself—because it has been quite assertive in recent years in dealing with the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue among others—has played into this general theme in Japan and elsewhere that China is a potential threat. Therefore, Japan and the United States have to act in lockstep with each other, particular on the military and security side in dealing with China. But, my argument would be that, yes, that's true to a certain extent but at the same time that kind of activity comes alongside a perception that what is going on in Japan today is much more than just the improvement of the alliance. It's the development on the part of certain right wing elements in Japan to try and develop a much more assertive Japan, a Japan that rejects history, the legacy of World War II, that wants to redefine Japan's role in the region in ways that sound more like Japan decades and decades ago before the war. I think that is a misperception of the Japanese situation; but, I think that history issue and the way it keeps coming up in Japanese politics and by Prime Minister Abe is highly corrosive to where Japan and the United States want to go. I think the United States in some way needs to be more clear and more assertive with Japan about how damaging this is to the hopes of both Tokyo and Washington to develop their alliance and to become a more active and positive force within the region.

Haenle: So let me step back just from the alliance and look at President Obama's overall policy in Asia. He is coming out here in the next couple of days. His overarching theme will be to showcase the rebalancing strategy to Asia and that it has legs and that it is alive and well and will continue. We heard today in our discussions that, for many of the Chinese, the perception is that it is this rebalancing strategy that has emboldened Japan and countries like the Philippines to take an even stronger, a potentially more provocative stance on their particular claims. How do you see the rebalancing strategy in your own view? In your view, how has it changed or influenced China's calculus with regards to being increasingly assertive, or responding to and dealing with its maritime claims?

Swaine: I think, in general, the concept behind the rebalancing I endorse. I think it was important for the United States to communicate to the region and the world that it is deeply interested in Asia [and] that this interest is not just continuous but that it is going to grow over time, that it has a commitment that is not going to go away. It had to say that in the context of the aftermath of the Iraq and Afghanistan situation; in [addressing] a feeling that the United States was pulling back in many ways and a feeling of uncertainty about the American economy and where American capability was going to be in the future; and then, of course, in the context of China's greater growth and development. I think there was a need for the United States to in some way communicate the fact that it was not going to be withdrawing from or downgrading its position in Asia.

Haenle: And it was over invested in other areas of the world.

Swaine: Right, that it was somewhat over invested. Now, the follow through and the messaging and all the rest of that, I think could have been done much better. To a certain extent, some of the problems were unavoidable. The United States has not been able to show that it has, in a sense, focused its attention on Asia if that's what was implied by the rebalancing. It has still had to focus tremendously on events elsewhere: in Ukraine, in Crimea, Syria, going back to Libya, Iran. There

is still a very, very strong need for the United States to be focused on those areas as well. So where does that leave the rebalance? For a lot of people, there is still an expectation that this is going to have to have some sort of clearer follow through. Thus far, a lot of impressions are that the United States has talked a lot, but has not really done a whole lot other than a slight commitment to increasing in military presence and a fair amount, a pretty high amount, of high level interaction at the highest leadership level. These activities, I think, are appreciated. But, at the same time, they are not really going to give countries in the region a sense that the United States is really weighing in in a more significant way. So, it's a real challenge for them and I think they acknowledge that.

The other problem is that rebalancing is gotten to be too much as understood as a military action; it's much more emphasized as being a security action. I think President Obama's trip to Asia this time and his following trip to Beijing for the APEC meeting and his following trip for the East Asia Summit in part is going to be designed to allay those concerns, to distract—not distract, that's a bad word—but to try to refocus the attention on the part of a lot of countries in the region and elsewhere that the rebalancing is not foremost and essential about military and security issues. Yes, that is important and yes, the United States has a role to play there. But, there is a very deliberate desire on President Obama's trip this time to Asia and his subsequent trips to show that the rebalancing is much more than just that. I think you are going to see that in some of the speeches that are going to be made in this round of his visit to Asia and some of the actions that are going to be taken.

Haenle: Thank you very much Michael for sharing your views today [and] spending time with us today. It's always a pleasure when you come out and you are welcome to come back out any time and continue these kinds of discussions, which are important for the relationship and for the region as well. That's it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World Podcast.” If you would like to read more about Michael Swaine's research and work, you can find those at the Carnegie Endowment website at www.carnegieendowment.org. From there, you can navigate to the Carnegie–Tsinghua website to see the work of all the scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thank you for listening and be sure to tune in next time.