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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Michael Swaine**

Episode 21: 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: I want to talk about what you are out here doing this week, which is that you’re in the process of finalizing an assessment on the long term future evolution of the Asia Pacific and its implications for cooperation and conflict, especially between the United States and China. You are meeting with scholars this week, Chinese scholars and experts, to gather their input into this report which I think will be important. As part of the report, you selected four major variables that you think will most influence how the Asia Pacific region, how the US and China relationship and security relationship will evolve over the short, medium, and long term, and, finally, five possible future regional security environments that could emerge over the next 30 to 35 years in the Asia Pacific region. Looking forward to this report but before we get there, can you explain to us how you picked those variables and the environments and give us a bit of a preview on what you think you will find?

Swaine: As you’ve just suggested, this is a big project and there are a lot of different moving parts to it. Carnegie is not the only entity involved in doing this; there are several other participants in this multi-dimensional project that we are doing. Carnegie’s role is really to sort of apply a version of what we used in that study that you mentioned that we completed last year on the impact of the Chinese military on the U.S.-Japan Alliance, that net assessment approach, to a much broader scene, all across Asia and a longer timeline—at least 35 years or so out. Of course, that becomes, to some degree, highly speculative. But, the whole intent is not to project the future, by any means. It’s really to try to bound the possibilities, to try to find what are the alternative futures that could likely emerge over this long timeframe in the short, medium, and long term; and, then to identify what are the key drivers of these alternative futures that could occur. Then, finally, [to consider] how the United States or China influences the environment to move it more to a corporative direction and away from a more conflictual direction.

To do that, we identified four different areas we thought would have the biggest impact on the future of the region. One of them is questions of domestic development [and] domestic stability and instability, particularly in countries like China and North Korea. We saw that as major uncertainties, to a certain degree. There are other countries too that could have political problems domestically, of course, including the conflictual. But, the really major stability issues are in China and North Korea. So that was one and that was a very important set of variables. A second one was defense spending and military equipment and capital. That is sort of the raw capabilities if you will that is very closely related in part to economic success. The ability of states to be able to really acquire and deploy the equipment of military power of one sort or another is a

very important. So that was sort of a no brainer as a variable. The third was a very general set of variables; it includes intentions, if you will, to sort of match the capabilities which is national objectives, military doctrine, [and] approaches to the use of force. Countries have different approaches, they have different objectives, and we wanted to see to what degree these objectives will likely prevail overtime. What are they today? How might they evolve in the future? So that one of the really important things. The last was what we call the “long standing, enduring relationships.” This tries to capture not the sort of the ephemeral shifts of this, that and the other on the political side, but the long-term relationships developed either by positive or negative history, experience, alliance relations, [and/or] long term political, security, and economic relations; and, how they shape and guide the evolution of the future. So, that’s a lot of different variables to look at. So we are trying to sort of assess what is the state of play now in these four different areas today as far as establishing a region and shaping the regional environment, and how is that likely to emerge in the future.

As you say, we identified five different alternative futures and we went all the way from an extreme, which is one of conflict, an Asia that is embroiled in different intensities of conflict, episodic over time, over an extended period of time—that’s really the worst possible case citations—all the way to a very positive outcome which would be, essentially a highly cooperative Asia, an Asia that is much more integrated and has a much more greater degree of conformity in terms of its security outlooks and security interests...

Haenle: Architecture as well.

Swaine: ... Yes, and, an implication that there is an Asian security architecture that is more overarching than just the U.S.-led hub and spoke system just based on bilateral alliances. So, that kind of bounded future. Now, the real question is to sort of identify what are the mid-range [potential outcomes] because those are the more likely. The more likely outcomes are going to be the midrange, and the question there is what are the most salient mid-range outcomes and what is likely to drive those outcomes in different directions. And, even though you say we are finalizing the report, we are still in the process of working through a lot of those different variables to see how they are going to play out in the future.

Haenle: Well, we look forward to the report. One of the variables you mentioned was relationships and, of course, here in China President Xi Jinping put forward a concept for a relationship called the “new type of great power” or “new type of major country” relations as an effort to try to avoid the historical precedence of a rising power coming into conflict with an established power. This will likely be a point of discussion between United States and Chinese leaders going forward and I wanted to ask you where you think the best opportunities are for the United States and China, as National Security Advisor Susan Rice said, to try to operationalize this concept where the two sides can move toward enhancing their cooperation and to achieve more positive interaction between [China] and the United States. Is this a possibility? Is this a worthwhile effort for the two countries?

Swaine: Well, I definitely think it's a worthwhile effort. Thus far, this concept has generally involved some very vague talk about cooperation, about searching for win-win outcomes as the Chinese like to say, avoiding zero-sum types of thinking. Of course, it's always good to express that kind of sentiment; but, it's another thing to try to root these kind of things in interests, in state

interests that converge in some fundamental ways. There is no simple answer to your question, 'How do you build this kind of a relationship?' I think it takes hard work; it takes consistent attention by the senior leaderships of both countries over time. It takes an acute appreciation of where it is that the two countries really do differ and how that difference would sustain itself and go off into the future. There are certain issues in which the United States and China are simply not going to agree over time. So on this question, you should say, 'How do you build on what is positive in the relationship?' The most obvious basis for that, of course in my view, is the common interests the two countries have in tackling common problems. The thing that defines the U.S.-China relationship today in contrast to what it was in the last century, since the beginning of the reform period in the early 1980s, is that the United States and China are now deeply, deeply embedded in a much larger network of issues, of problems that if they don't cooperate to deal with effectively, aren't going to get solved.

Haenle: And they have global implications...

Swaine: ... And they have vastly global implications than just for the United States and China. The United States and China cannot treat each other as if this is just a bilateral relationship because it's not. It's really a global influencing type of relationship [and] they have to really appreciate the dimensions of that. Now, how do you do that? That becomes the challenge. How do you operationalize that in a way that's really meaningful?

Haenle: In October, we hosted President Bush's former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley who also like you talked about putting cooperation as the centerpiece as part of a new constructive relationship and building on areas of common interests. You hear concern in the United States that, at the end of the day, perhaps China is only concerned with two things in this new construct: one is getting more respect from the United States and other major players in the world. Two, figuring out how to get the Americans to concede on their core interests. In your interaction with Chinese experts and scholars do you think there will be a real effort on the Chinese part to do what you described and what Steve Hadley described to build on areas of common interests? Or, do you think that it's really going to be focused on China's core interests and no much interest on enhancing cooperation?

Swaine: I certainly can understand where people come from when they say that's sort of the primary thing that drives the Chinese. The Chinese do [see] themselves as certainly the inferior party in dealing with the United States. They see themselves as a weaker power, a developing country. They have lots of domestic problems. So, they want to get the United States to cooperate as much as possible and not apply pressure on them in a whole variety of areas. I think that is never going to change. It's certainly not going to change in our lifetime, that's going to continue.

But, I think having said that, the Chinese are genuinely interested in trying to establish a basis for cooperation that is not based upon a great power rivalry, not based upon an assumption that one power or the other must dominate over time or you will have war or instability. Or, that the effort to dominate may create war or instability. I think the Chinese, as we heard in conversation with the Chinese today, look at the region and they see themselves as a power that has growing influence in the region but still is highly dependent on the position and the attitude of the United States and what the US does. My general view is that while the United States ... of course, I don't think should concede simply to Chinese core interest, especially given its effort on

Taiwan [for example]. Nonetheless, I do think it's important that the United States comes to grip with the fundamental underlying issue in the relationship which is that China's desire to have greater control over its immediate environment in the Pacific, in the Western Pacific in particular, is going to come up increasingly against what many Americans see as the essential conditions for stability in the region which has been historically the general maritime dominance of the United States. It's been the U.S. role in the region as a dominate power. That dominance, either deliberately or indirectly, more like indirectly is being challenged by the mere fact of China's growing power. It's challenging that position. The real challenge to the establishing great power relationship is to establish some kind of understanding between the two powers as to how the future is going to change that assumption, that U.S. assumption and what it is that the two countries can do to accommodate each other in their interactions over time. That requires some degree of greater understanding in dealing with common hotspots like Korea, like Taiwan, like these maritime disputes. They are not going to go away; there is not a final solution to them in anything like a foreseeable time frame. But, there can be a more stable basis for dealing with them alongside a much greater presence by the Chinese. They are going to be more active, they are going to be more present. If the United States assumes that the only solution to the current security environment in Asia is for the United States to neutralize the capacity of the Chinese to operate in the Western Pacific, including as a military power, we are going to have trouble.

Haenle: Are we having these discussions with the Chinese?

Swaine: I don't think we are. I don't think we are having what I would call a real strategic dialogue with the Chinese. To some degree, this is not possible on the official level. On the official level, the two governments exchange talking points and there is a certain amount of give and take but not much. I think what has to happen and it has to begin on the unofficial level, that there has to be more of a kind of dialogue that we had today, where we sit down with intelligent, thoughtful Chinese and you talk about the future, you talk about how different types of developments in the future could change and shape national interests and how those national interests could either converge or diverge and what would most help them in converging in various ways or at least deal with the divergent issues. That sounds very vague, I know, but I think it can be addressed in a much more concrete way and in a more long term way. Because—and I'm not talking about the United States accommodating China—I think there has to be a mutual accommodation. I think the Chinese themselves, particularly on these nationalistic issues... these sovereignty issues are driven by their domestic environment by an inordinate degree and it takes more courageous leadership on the part of the Chinese leadership to put in check and try to suppress and channel that kind of nationalism in ways that are more responsible than they have done thus far. That requires a certain amount of willingness to accommodate on interests that they define as core beyond that of Taiwan, Tibet, and that sort of thing. There needs to be a recognition on the Chinese side that this is not all about the US and its own accommodation to China's rise. Its also about how China is going to treat its own environment over the long term and that kind of an issue can't be a sort of, 'one topic, one day, five-hour discussions, that's great we aired our views, let's move on.' It has to be a sustained, in-depth discussion, one that develops from lower levels and goes outward from there.

Haenle: You know we believe in that in the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center which is why we have a long term standing presence on the ground. We welcome you to come back. 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 of Michael Swaine's research and work, you can find those at the Carnegie Endowment's 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.