



CARNEGIE-TSINGHUA
CENTER FOR GLOBAL POLICY

Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Patrick Cronin**

Episode 9: U.S. Policy in East Asia and Pacific
Region

December 31, 2013

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 from the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center located in Beijing. I’m Paul Haenle, the Director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I’ll be your host.

Today, we’re thrilled to be joined by a good friend of mine, Patrick Cronin, who is a leading scholar on Asia-Pacific security and U.S. defense, foreign, and development policy. Patrick is a senior advisor and senior director of the Asia Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security. Previously, Patrick was the senior director of the Institute of National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, where he also oversaw the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs. Patrick, thank you for joining us today.

Patrick, in the past you have described the U.S. rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region as a trenchant matter, but the United States has always been a Pacific power and we’ve made adjustments to our posture to Asia many times over the past several decades without the need for such publicity and fanfare. Can you describe what developments you think led to the United States choosing this strategic approach, now called rebalancing, to the region, and why is it important in your opinion?

Cronin: Paul, the United States has been rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific, along with the rest of the world, as the Asia-Pacific rises, but the Obama Administration started off in 2009 wanting to rebalance U.S. foreign policy priorities away from the global war on terrorism and away from two protracted ground conflicts to take advantage of the opportunities of a rising Asia-Pacific region. In the midst of that, the tensions, especially in maritime Asia, between China and its neighbors started to accelerate a fear of Chinese assertiveness, something that most Chinese don’t accept, but U.S. policy makers were hearing this with greater frequency from governments throughout the region. So we saw in Hanoi in 2010 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton drawing a line about the need for ensuring good behavior and settling disputes peacefully.

The United States was leaning forward on needing to be more active in the Asia-Pacific. By the time 2011 rolled around, the United States was slated to host or attend a series of historic summits, historic because this was the first East Asia summit attended by a President—something that the Obama administration had again implemented because it wanted to be more politically and diplomatically engaged in the Asia-Pacific. It wanted to promote more trade with the Asia-Pacific, but it also wanted to reassure its allies and partners that it was going to be a permanent presence to keep stability in the region. The consequence of having a focus on the military dimension in the Fall of 2011 on the pivot to Asia made it sound like this was a radical departure rather than a continuation and evolution in U.S. policy thinking, including from the Bush administration to the Obama administration, and going back even before then that this was really a comprehensive policy, that it wasn’t a military policy, and that even the military component was somehow radically new because 2,500 marines might be eventually based in Darwin, Australia at the end of 2020. None of this was radical. It was really the attempt of the United States to put down a marker that ‘we’re here, we’re going to remain here, we’re a permanent Pacific power, and we want to engage all of the countries of this region, not just the ones that we have been allied, in fact, traditionally.’ Underscoring all of that was a good relationship—a growing partnership with China.

Haenle: Here in China, many saw the announcement of the rebalancing strategy as a move towards a more hostile approach to China, and many who were convinced that the United States

was intent on keeping China down or blocking its rise felt that their views were reinforced by what they heard from the United States. How do you respond to these concerns here in China?

Cronin: The pivot, or rebalancing policy, broke onto the public knowledge of maritime disputes, and in that sense it seemed like containing China's rise, China's assertiveness, and the desire to protect its sea lines of communication and its other interests in the maritime space around China. But the United States first of all predicated rebalancing on a growing partnership with China because China's successful rise is important for United States' success and vice versa.

Secondly, the containment idea is a Cold War relic. It's the idea that somehow you can completely wall off a country. We could with the Soviet Union because it was not integrated with the global economy, but it's a farce when you think about trying to contain China. Now, is it this lesser aim of restraining China? Well, no, we are not trying to restrain China either. Why would we have a growing dialogue with China that is structurally between our two governments trying to cooperate on more and more areas? We're trying to integrate a rising China into the global system, a system [in which] China will, with its bigger voice, be a norm0maker and not just a norm-taker. So this is going to evolve over time, but we do still have these competitive areas. We're going to have to find a way to reduce the risk in this competition so that they do not dominate the cooperation.

Haenle: The US rebalancing strategy, as of late, has been called into question, accused of being unsustainable, given US budgetary pressures and instability in the Middle East, especially in Syria. Will the American interest and priorities in the Middle East—including ending the civil war in Syria, disarming the regime of chemical weapons, now pursuing nuclear negotiations with Iran, peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine—will these issues divert the United States from rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region?

Cronin: The United States has never been accused of having a consistently, evenly developed foreign policy in any sphere, and I'm afraid here, in regard to the Asia-Pacific, it's likely to be done in fits and starts to varying degrees. We have a messy democracy, and our democracy has been exercising its muscle lately in terms of even shutting down the government, something that seems completely incredible to the man or woman on the street in the United States. So, the United States has always been a global power. We're going to have to continue to balance our global interests, including especially the interests in the Asia-Pacific, where there are so many opportunities, along with the Middle East, where there are so many problems, quite frankly. If there's anything new, it's not the American inability to stay engaged in the Asia-Pacific; it's the inability of any country to try to bring sensible order to a very tumultuous Middle East. The Arab Spring is one part of it, and maybe "Arab Winter" is a better name for some of it. The proliferation threats coming out of the Gulf where, if you had multiple nuclear powers developing in unstable Arab countries along the Persian Gulf, where China will be increasingly importing more and more of its energy—this is not in China's interest. So, we're going to have to figure out ways to cooperate on the Middle East, and that's an Asia-Pacific issue, in other words. So these areas are related.

The idea that you can somehow have, as Kevin Rudd called it, Pax Pacifica that is somehow only the Pacific, detached from the global economy including the Middle East, is probably not accurate, and I don't think that is what he meant necessarily. He was trying to get to the difficulty issue of China-U.S. [relations] in the 21st century affecting the Pacific region in a

big way. So, the Asia-Pacific will continue to be a strategic priority for the United States for the very simple reason that our future prosperity and peace will increasingly rely on the peace and prosperity of Asia-Pacific countries. Period. It won't necessarily follow, this month or next month, exactly that route, but it will over the next number of years and decades to come.

Haenle: So, you've talked about the importance of a constructive, positive U.S.-China relationship in the context of the rebalancing strategy of the United States. You've talked about, or alluded, to the fact that China has an increasing stake in stability in the Middle East, and the United States and China need to find ways to cooperate to maintain that stability. China's growing dependence on oil from the Middle East might necessitate that in the future, and now there's talk of this new type of great power relations between China and the United States, 新型大国关系 (xinxing daguo guanxi), which Xi Jinping, on his trip to the United States, talked about. It received considerable attention. What is necessitating this discussion? Why would the United States and China need to look, at this point, to a new framework for their relationship, and what would the two countries need to do in order to consider this new type of great power relationship as a new framework for the two countries?

Cronin: The world's largest power and the world's biggest reemerging power need a stable, cooperative relationship. They don't currently have a framework that allows for us to ensure that not only China and the United States, but also all of those in the region and around the world, understand that stable cooperative relationship. So, I think it is very healthy that China has put on the table the idea that we should be talking about a common security in a new framework. But from an American problem solving perspective, I very much hope that the framework can also work from the bottom up in terms of filling in serious, effective cooperation. A lot of it needs to happen economically, more people to people dialogue and exchanges need to happen, diplomatically obviously across so many issues, civil society, but the tough issues, while not the very toughest issues, but the very tough issues of things that could go wrong—nuclear proliferation, especially North Korea and maritime disputes that escalate—these things could lead to essentially greater strategic competition.

So, I would argue that the United States and China as part of this strategic framework need to be working on a very serious menu of risk-reduction measures, not just between each other but also with others in the region, multilaterally and bilaterally, to try to mitigate the effects of incidents, accidents, miscalculations, and derailing what is overall a very cooperative pathway for U.S.-China relations, and, again, that's why it's helpful to have a top-down strategic framework to remember what we're trying to achieve so that when we build from the bottom-up, we're actually trying to work towards a larger goal.

Haenle: So you talk about the risk-reduction strategies that our two countries can take to alleviate potential increased tension or conflict. What are the factors that could threaten the realization of this new framework, and what are some steps that our two countries could take to increase the likelihood that we could achieve this new type—this new model in the relations between our two countries?

Cronin: Well, first of all, we should keep expectations realistic. We shouldn't be looking for dramatic change overnight, and we shouldn't overpromise because public opinion is having a big

effect in both of our countries. Domestic politics are weighing heavily on decision-makers' thinking. We have to be very acutely aware of that, and the more we promise things that we can't deliver right away [the more this] sets you up for failure, ridicule, and backlash. So, don't overpromise. Secondly, build effective, tangible, visible, cooperative steps, even if they're baby steps. If they're effective and they are in the right direction and they are serious, people will understand that. So, obviously nuclear proliferation is a global issue, but it is also a regional issue. In fact, it is the most acute threat, I think, to peace—real peace—and security in the Asia-Pacific, and we have different approaches to dealing with North Korea. We have to respect that, but we have to figure out a way to actually start to achieve effective results, not just pretend that we are achieving effective results. That can lead to the maritime space where we have to be realistic about this; we are not going to change sovereignty claims and disputes.

We're going to have to figure out a way to come up with common rules, though, so that we don't have our navies and coast guards and the navies and coast guards of other countries in this region bumping—literally, bumping into each other or starting to shoot across the bow. That could really trigger polarization of the region overnight that could lead to strategic competition. So I don't want to focus on just the really hard issues because these are also very intractable issues. I don't want to overpromise that China-U.S. cooperation can somehow deliver. But if we start to, in good faith, work more decidedly on trying to limit the risk—which is a more realistic gain—that could come from these disputes, then I think people will start to open up [to the idea] that there's mutual benefit. There's a common security commitment and investment to be made here. It's even more true, obviously, when you think about the global agenda: global governance problems from development to energy and the environment. There is no shortage of issues. That's a given. I mean, I think that should be something we double down on in terms of cooperation.

I am, however, still worried about disputes rising up suddenly and eclipsing all of the good that we could be doing. There are really three costs here, right? The first cost is the opportunity cost of the United States and China not cooperating. When you have the two biggest powers in the world not cooperating, no matter what the issue, the world is losing. Secondly, there's the risk of miscalculation. The longer we live without agreed-upon rules and working on measures and mechanisms for transparency and communication to try to limit and tamp down crises, as long as we don't have that crisis management architecture, we're inviting hazards that could derail the relationship. Thirdly, the cost, ultimately, of those types of incidents leading to strategic competition over the long-term could derail the entire Asian century, the entire framework for the international community.

Haenle: The public perceptions in both countries, the United States and China, is an important component, and we see in China a great deal of suspicion about U.S. policy towards China. We see a great deal of suspicion about U.S. intention in terms of its relationship with China. People question whether the United States is trying to keep China down. In the United States, I would say, we have some suspicion about China's rise and what China's overall intention is. What can we do? I would think that an important part will be convincing our publics that a new framework for our relationship is something that is good for both of our countries. What are the kinds of things that our two countries can do to begin to change public perception and improve public opinion?

Cronin: There are a number of steps the United States and China can take to improve public opinion about the value of U.S.-China cooperation. Obviously, continuing to build on the success

of our trade and economic and commercial success that we're both benefitting from this, and the world is benefitting from this success. Making sure that both of our economies continue to grow, and grow together, is one of the first things that should be easy to do. That really is a win-win situation. Secondly, in terms of tackling some of the tough, global policy issues, whether it's poverty or disease or dealing with climate change or dealing with nuclear proliferation—the United States needs to cooperate.

So, let's just take global health issues in the developing world. The United States and China have a common overlapping interest in delivering effective healthcare to Africa. The United States has made it a priority under both Republican and Democratic administrations to work on this area. China, now that it has achieved much greater development, has a growing interest in also trying to deliver effective care. So, something as simple as—not simple but—something as specific as global health in underdeveloped areas in Africa could be a joint project that, while it may not be quite as tangible as a road, it will be visible because you can talk about it, you can point to it. There are indicators that measure it, and that's important to think about. Obviously, then, we need to avoid doing damage, and that goes back to my agenda for risk-reduction management and building the kind of crisis management architecture that would allow us to avoid doing anything really damaging to such an important relationship.

Haenle: Some are now calling for high-profile cooperative projects, similar to what you've been discussing that would be very high in profile, that could begin to convince the American public and the Chinese public that both of our countries are benefitting from the cooperation and would show the value of the U.S.-China relationship to both of our peoples. Former National Security Advisor Steve Hadley was out here three weeks ago in Beijing and suggested a few headline initiatives. One included eradicating a childhood disease, something that would benefit Chinese people, something that would benefit American people, and in fact would benefit the entire international community. After our discussion today, Patrick, with Chinese scholars, someone came up to me at the end and said 'I would include on that list a joint U.S.-China mission to Mars.' Those kind of headline initiatives, are there any you could think of that we should add to the list?

Cronin: I think [we should add] global education to address the rising middle class that's happening especially in the Asia-Pacific. We have a common interest in this area. The Asia-Pacific is going to double the number, essentially, of college-aged students, and the demand for education is going to grow well-beyond the brick-and-mortar college boundaries that we currently have. The United States has a strong track record in our university, our tertiary education system, and China has a growing record in this area too. So, it may be that there's something we could do in education for the rising new middle classes of the world, largely leveraging information-technology, understanding that [that] doesn't replace the need for face-to-face contact with a professor, but somehow someone is going to have to fill this demand if the rising middle classes of the world are able to take advantage of the opportunities of the 21st-century economy. I still would like to deal with global health issues and deal with a range of other issues. So there's not one silver bullet to try to prove to the publics that U.S.-China cooperation is in the mutual interests of both countries and, indeed, the world, but I think there are endless opportunities.

We now need to choose, we need to focus. Some of this has to come from civil society, not from governments alone. So, there are many actors that could take advantage of these opportunities. On health, it could be the Gates Foundation working with China on a global health

problem. On education, it could be the universities in both countries taking the leadership role to try to develop means of reaching out to the emerging middle class to provide greater education. And yes, there are roles for governments. Maybe it is in space, where there could be some kind of joint space project that could benefit all of humanity that the United States and China could undertake. The popular movie *Gravity* is, I don't know if you've seen it or if it's been seen here in China, but it's a fabulous movie. It's fascinating to watch because the American has to go through the Chinese space station to survive. Not to give away a spoiler alert here on the movie *Gravity*—it's an indirect form [of communication]—but it opens up the possibility that there aren't many countries in space. The United States and China both have space capabilities, and there could be some things that are done that are bigger than the Earth, bigger than us that show just how small we are down here on Earth and how humble we need to be about so many issues but that together we can achieve things that were unthinkable in the past.

Haenle: Well I think your ideas of global health and global education are very good ideas. These are certainly priorities. Education and health are priorities for China, and they are priorities for the United States. This is the kind of thinking, I think—this kind of exercise between the United States and China—of thinking through these issues will be good in itself. Just the exercise to go through and think about the kinds of things that our two countries can do together that will benefit our two countries and the international community. Patrick, thank you very much for spending time with us today. That's it for this edition of Carnegie-Tsinghua "China in the World" podcast. If you'd like to read the remarks Patrick made this week in Beijing about the new type of great power relations and U.S.-China relations as well as a summary of the roundtable on China's future foreign policy, which Patrick and his colleagues from the Center for a New American Security participated in today at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center, you can find those on the on the Carnegie-Tsinghua website at www.carnegietsinghua.org. I encourage you to explore our site, and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.