

## Chapter 6

# The Contradictions of US China Policy

## Implications for the US Air Force

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### Abstract

The United States has a bipartisan China policy. Despite rhetorical differences, both parties support a two-pronged policy of “congaement” and reassuring America’s regional allies. Congaement combines military containment with economic engagement. Reassurance attempts to convince American allies in the region that America will act as the ultimate guarantor of those states’ security.

These two policies pose problems for the country and, by extension, the US Air Force. The economic engagement policy has helped China narrow the relative power gap with the United States, thereby fueling Beijing’s regional ambitions. As Beijing’s relative power grows, China will become harder to contain militarily. Meanwhile, the policy of reassurance infantilizes America’s allies, encouraging them to shirk their responsibility to provide the majority of their own defense. The incoherence of the policy—and the effects it has had on US partners—should lead to a shift in strategy. A more prudent American policy would change US force posture to that of a genuinely offshore balancer, forcing Asian nations to do more for their own defense.

### Introduction

The Pentagon’s January 2012 defense strategic guidance states its intention to “rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>1</sup> As it does so, the defense budget is likely to grow at a much slower rate than it did during the last decade. With this rebalancing taking place in the con-

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This chapter is adapted from the author’s Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 717, *China, America, and the Pivot to Asia*, 8 January 2013. The author thanks Charles Zakaib for editorial assistance.

text of relatively constrained budgets, increasing focus on Asia may force the Pentagon to accept a zero-sum tradeoff toward conventional capabilities and away from counterinsurgency and nation-building projects like those in Iraq and Afghanistan. One symbol of that shift is the ongoing promotion of Air-Sea Battle, a concept emphasizing rapid and integrated power projection that can penetrate anti-access/area-denial threats.<sup>2</sup> Its emphasis on distant platforms with the ability to attack in-depth, including the new long-range bomber, will assign much of the responsibility for producing security in the region to the US Navy and Air Force.

More importantly, however, the changes in strategy and battle concepts signal a fundamental acknowledgment that the main potential threat to US national security is a potential peer competitor. After a decade of chasing terrorists and insurgents, US policy makers have chosen rightly to focus on the growing economic and military strength in Asian states, particularly China. States remain the most important actors in international politics. Neither transnational economic, religious, or identity-political forces nor international organizations can compete with powerful states in the realm of international security affairs. To produce security—and to cause much trouble in international politics—you need a state.<sup>3</sup>

Looking into the twenty-first century, it seems increasingly possible that America will be eclipsed in national economic—and possibly military—terms by China. China is likely to overtake the United States in gross domestic product (GDP) at market exchange rates in 2018. To give a sense of China's staggering growth, its GDP was one-eighth that of America's in 2000 at market exchange rates, and by 2010 it was one-half.<sup>4</sup> Given the potential impact of US-China competition on both US security and domestic politics, getting Sino-American relations right is the most important challenge for US foreign policy makers.

Beyond China, India is undergoing rapid economic development, possesses a favorable demographic profile, and is likely to play an increasingly prominent role in both regional and international politics. Japan, despite demographic and fiscal problems, remains an important player. In short, no other region on earth is likely to see its share of global power grow as much as the Asia-Pacific region in the decades ahead. To the extent that the concentration of power in the international system shifts toward East Asia, American strategists should focus on that region.

First among US concerns in Asia is the US-China security relationship. China has been at the center of American thought on East Asia for more than two decades. This chapter is not an effort to provide a net assessment or a projection of the future military balance between the United States and China. Similarly, it is not a recap of the past few decades or even years of US-China diplomacy. Rather, it scrutinizes the way US policy makers think about China and the consequences of any shortcomings. Getting the United States' China policy right will have profound significance for America generally and for the US Air Force in particular.

## US Policy toward China

Washington's China policy is a mix of elements taken from both the liberal and realist schools of international relations. Liberal elements include efforts to promote democracy, including by furthering economic development in China. In a mechanism reminiscent of modernization theory, which came into vogue during the Vietnam War, economic growth produces a growing middle class that tends to demand greater political rights. In turn, these demands generate more democratic politics.<sup>5</sup> These increasingly democratic politics then are supposed to plug into a crude version of democratic peace theory, in which the domestic institutions of democratic countries prevent them from going to war (or presumably, in this case, even engaging in serious security competition) with other democracies.<sup>6</sup>

The other liberal aspect of US policy includes attempts to constrain China in a web of international institutions that would allow it to rise into the existing international order—shaped by the institutions created under American leadership after World War II—thereby preventing it from transforming the rules that govern the order.<sup>7</sup> This logic holds that while “the United States cannot thwart China's rise, it can help ensure that China's power is exercised within the rules and institutions that the United States and its partners have crafted over the last century, rules and institutions that can protect the interests of all states in the more crowded world of the future.”<sup>8</sup>

The realist element of US China policy is the effort to prevent China from gaining a dominant military position in the Asia-Pacific region. American military planners have developed a posture in Asia designed with the explicit purpose of putting China's energy supplies

at risk. As longtime Asia correspondent Richard Halloran recently wrote in the official journal of the US Air Force Association, Washington “has begun positioning forces which could threaten China’s supply lines through the South China Sea. The oil and raw materials transported through those shipping lanes are crucial to a surging Chinese economy—an economy paying for Beijing’s swiftly expanding military power.”<sup>9</sup>

Halloran then cites the work of an active-duty Air Force major explicitly likening China’s predicament to that of Japan’s in the 1930s and 40s, arguing that Washington should “exploit a critical vulnerability—China’s dependence on sea lines of communication [SLOC].”<sup>10</sup> Former US Pacific Command commander Dennis Blair and China analyst Kenneth Lieberthal write that “the United States has employed and will likely in the future continue to use naval blockades when necessary,” including specific reference to China, but then wave off the idea that other nations should be concerned: “US naval hegemony, however, need not be unsettling to other countries.”<sup>11</sup> The slightest effort to look at things from Beijing’s perspective shows that Washington’s military posture in the Asia-Pacific is perfectly tailored to amplify China’s worst fears about Washington’s intentions.

This combination of liberal and realist policies toward China has produced incoherent strategy. This incoherent policy has a name: *congagement*—part military containment, part economic engagement.<sup>12</sup> Congagement, for all intents and purposes, has been America’s China policy since at least the end of the Cold War.

Beyond congagement, the other aspect of Washington’s bipartisan China policy is the effort to reassure America’s allies about Washington’s commitment to provide their security. Instead of forcing states like Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and India to carry the bulk of the burden of hedging against China while watching how the balance of power plays out from across the Pacific, the bipartisan establishment favors reassuring these allies that Washington’s commitment is unshakeable. In a recent address to the Australian Parliament, President Obama referred respectively to an “unbreakable alliance” with Australia, a “commitment to the security of the Republic of Korea” that will “never waver,” and a “larger and long-term role in the region” for the United States. He added that the “United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay.”<sup>13</sup>

To summarize, the foreign-policy establishment favors a China policy with three major components: economic engagement; military

containment; and efforts to depress the autonomous military exertions of US allies, including through forward US deployments, diplomatic reassurance about American security guarantees, and Washington's own military spending.

### **The Problems with US Policy**

US policy toward China suffers from two fatal errors of internal logic and is unlikely to produce the desired ends of policy makers. First, conengagement, the combination of economic engagement and military containment, relies on a hopeless contradiction: it makes China more relatively powerful while seeking to ensure it acts as though it is weak. Second, reassuring US allies guarantees that the American taxpayer will continue funding the defense of states rich enough to defend themselves, forcing the United States to bear the burden as the balancer of first resort.

While Washington is trying to contain Chinese power, its policy of economic engagement is helping China to narrow the relative power gap. Unless one assumes that China is a historical and theoretical aberration—that it is entirely at peace with foreign military domination of its region—China is going to seek a larger politico-military role as it grows wealthier, and that growing wealth will make it harder to contain. It becomes even more difficult to believe that China is at peace with US military dominance in Asia when former high-ranking US officials state openly that “stripped of diplomatic niceties, the ultimate aim of American strategy is to hasten a revolution, albeit a peaceful one, that will sweep away China’s one-party authoritarian state.”<sup>14</sup> It truly would be bizarre if the men at the helm of China’s one-party authoritarian state felt comfortable leaving China’s security in Washington’s hands.

At bottom, conengagement relies on extraordinary faith in the idea that economic engagement and pleas for reform will transform China’s political system and/or that the existence of international institutions will limit its international ambitions. If the conengagement advocates have the courage of their convictions, they should explain why they believe both that (a) economic growth will necessarily lead to democratization, and (b) democratization will necessarily lead either to a China that is at peace with American military hegemony in Asia or a China whose security interests will become identical with

Washington's. Otherwise, the whole argument hangs on the constraints posed by international institutions, and it is far from clear that institutions will limit China's desire to develop greater control of its own security.

Beyond the dubious logic of congegation, the second problem with American strategy is that the policy of continually reassuring America's allies has ensured that a disproportionate share of the cost of hedging against China will need to be borne by the American taxpayers and their creditors. Instead of urging states in China's region to defend themselves, Washington reassures these states that America is committed to act as the balancer of first resort. This generates free riding and increases the costs to the United States. As University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer points out, geography and distribution of power are crucial factors that determine when states should balance against a potential threat or pass the buck to states closer to trouble.<sup>15</sup> In the current context, both geography and the distribution of power should allow Washington to pass the buck for balancing against China to other countries in the region.

But America's Asian allies do not carry even a proportional share of the burden of constraining China's ambition. While repeatedly stating their concerns about China's power and behavior, America's allies' military spending as a share of alliance spending has continually dropped. Japan spends only 1 percent of its GDP on defense, and Taiwan and South Korea spend less than 3 percent, despite their much closer proximity to both China and North Korea. While it is true that Japan, with a large economy, gets a lot out of that 1 percent—including a powerful navy—absent a formal US security commitment, Japan would likely be doing more.<sup>16</sup>

The United States, with the benefit of geographic isolation and a massive nuclear arsenal, spends nearly 5 percent of national income on its military. Despite this fact, the Beltway foreign-policy establishment claims that Americans should carry the bulk of the cost of securing Asia. As Georgetown's Victor Cha has written, that policy is based on Washington's long-standing desire to "exert maximum control over [its] smaller ally's actions" and "amplify US control and minimize any collusion among its alliance partners."<sup>17</sup> Thus, despite constant admonitions from American officials that allies—both in Asia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—should do more, there has been considerable desire in Washington that allies not

do more for fear that more powerful allies would be more autonomous allies, reducing America's leverage over their security policies.<sup>18</sup>

While such a rationale was dubious during the Cold War, it makes even less sense today. By constantly rushing to "reassure" US allies of the firmness of America's military commitment every time there is a diplomatic or security flare-up in Asia, Washington risks creating a dynamic similar to the one it created in NATO: demilitarizing US allies to the point where they appear unable or unwilling to defend themselves without help from America.

This subsequently raises the question, under what sort of circumstances would Washington seriously consider war with China over a given ally or partner? Moreover, exactly how sure are US partners of the solidity of America's alliance commitments and other assurances? If recent history is any indication, US analysts outside the Pentagon have given few considerations to actually fighting China.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, US allies should probably think long and hard about the validity of US commitments.

As mentioned above, Taiwan's military spending is entirely inadequate to the potential military task it faces, suggesting strongly that it believes it has some commitment of US support in the event of Chinese bullying or coercion.<sup>20</sup> When confronted with arguments that America's commitment to Taiwan is a wasting asset, Taiwanese foreign-policy thinkers protest that "if Taiwan were to fall, the United States would suffer a geostrategic disaster," possibly including "a Chinese nuclear attack on the US homeland."<sup>21</sup> Significantly less time has been dedicated to getting Taiwan's own house in order by reversing the trends in Taiwanese domestic politics that allow most Taiwanese to look away from the growing threat posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) than has been spent pleading for a broad interpretation of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act.<sup>22</sup>

To illustrate Taiwan's domestic political obstacles to defense, a recent survey reveals that a significant plurality of 12–17 year olds state they would not be willing to fight or have a family member fight to defend Taiwan from China. A former Taiwanese defense minister admitted, "It goes without saying that the number of Taiwanese willing to fight has come down significantly in recent years. I'm even surprised that the number of pro-defense people [in the survey] is so high."<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, there have been quiet indications that Washington would not fight China over Taiwan. For example, in a video

posted on the website of *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2007, an American scholar mentioned a conversation he had had with former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton, then a presidential candidate. In that conversation, Clinton remarked that it is absurd to think the American people would support a war with China over Taiwan. Although the video was quickly edited to remove the discussion of this remark, it calls into question the strength of the US commitment to Taiwan.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, and most importantly, no one has detailed precisely how even a much more powerful China would threaten the national security of the United States, with “security” defined narrowly and traditionally, to include America’s political autonomy, the safety of its citizens, and its ability to secure its economic well-being. At the bottom of realist theories of international relations is the prospect of being conquered or otherwise losing political sovereignty. Just as it is terrifically difficult to envision the United States conquering China today, it is similarly difficult to imagine China conquering the United States, given the Pacific Ocean and the massive American nuclear arsenal.

Of course, a number of intermediate problems are more likely. China is unlikely to be happy leaving its maritime security to the whims of American policy makers forever. A much more powerful China could attempt to use its navy to exclude the United States from engaging in commerce with states in Asia. If it could overwhelm neighboring states with so much power as to render them helpless, China could hold hostage the SLOCs in Asia to extract concessions from other states in the region. But it bears asking how likely those scenarios are, especially considering the considerable costs China would bear to achieve such results.

Problematically, US officials seem to think that Chinese policy makers should entrust the United States with China’s security. For example, Michael Schiffer, deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia, has stated that Washington welcomes a “strong, responsible, and prosperous China” that will take on a “constructive” role in regional and global institutions.<sup>25</sup> In this formulation, however, “responsible” and “constructive” are doing a lot of work. What these words mean, in practice, is that Washington would like to see Beijing step up as a junior partner working under Washington’s leadership to help America pursue its policy goals. In practice, however, there is little evidence that Washington wishes to include Chinese preroga-

tives in its definition of “responsible” policies or “constructive” roles. Indeed, as discussed above, the United States has sought to control the policy even of its allies.

Nevertheless, hawkish Washington policy makers act mystified by the idea that China would seek a more capable military. As former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld famously mused, “Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment [in its military]? Why these continuing large and expanding arms purchases? Why these continuing robust deployments?”<sup>26</sup>

But the answer is obvious: China’s military modernization—particularly that of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)—is designed to bring control of China’s national security into the hands of the Chinese government. As the Heritage Foundation’s Dean Cheng sensibly observes, “With its growing dependence on sea lanes, China almost inevitably will need to expand the PLA’s [People’s Liberation Army] naval capabilities, both to protect the country’s access to resources and markets and to deny opponents the ability to endanger that access.”<sup>27</sup>

## Changes for US China Policy

A prudent American policy would urge Japan, South Korea, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, and other nations in Asia with concerns about China’s ambition to provide for their own defense while carefully watching Chinese military developments and behavior. Existing US policy creates a *de facto* agreement between Washington and its Asian allies in which we agree to defend them and they agree to let us.<sup>28</sup> As one report puts it, the deal is that allies “provide bases and ports for the US military and contribute generously to supporting their presence,” and “in return, America provides deterrence and defense.”<sup>29</sup>

Were the United States to create distance between itself and its Asian allies and clients, however, several things would likely happen. First, those states would probably increase their own efforts to balance against China’s growing power. Indeed, in the 1970s when the Soviet Union was increasing its military buildup in East Asia and the United States was not keeping pace, Japan began boosting its own military efforts.<sup>30</sup> News reports in recent months indicate these countries have a considerable amount of anxiety about Chinese behavior,

reflected in their diplomacy. However, the resources these countries have dedicated to defending themselves from potential Chinese coercion do not reflect this concern.

For wealthy and technologically advanced Asian states with ballooning retired populations and shrinking workforces, such as Japan, doing more to secure themselves would create powerful pressures to pursue nuclear weapons programs. Although in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster such a discussion would be fraught with domestic as well as international political perils in Japan, the powerful logic of substituting capital for labor and securing its territory with the ultimate deterrent would likely weigh heavily on the minds of Japanese—and possibly South Korean and Taiwanese—policy makers.

Washington policy makers have historically viewed such developments as anywhere from extremely undesirable to apocalyptically bad. However, willfully plunging headlong into security competition with China—while our economic policies help to narrow the relative power gap between the two countries—is even more unappetizing. Moreover, the longer Washington infantilizes its Asian allies and other countries with frontline concerns about China's growing power, the more difficult it will be to get them off the dole and to convince them to devote a larger share of their national resources and attention to the potential challenges posed by China.

In terms of policy, Washington should stop intervening at every diplomatic flare-up in Asia. It should not seek to cultivate anti-China paranoia but should instead sow doubts about exactly where the American military would be committed. Such measures should include private conversations with longtime allies like Japan and South Korea as well as countries that have grown close to Washington more recently, like India and Vietnam. Washington should encourage closer coordination between these countries without the United States even being present, let alone leading the discussions. Such measures would raise questions about America's commitment to the region, minimizing the free riding that American policies have heretofore encouraged.

The most difficult dilemma posed by this policy would be sowing doubt and uncertainty among US allies without indicating to China that Washington does not care about Chinese aggression. Washington should make clear to China that while Washington is not encouraging South Korean or Japanese nuclear proliferation, a more distant United States coupled with Chinese provocations toward Taiwan or

other neighbors could conceivably have the result of producing such proliferation, an outcome the PRC strongly wants to avoid.

Relatedly, Washington should undertake a review of its basing arrangements in the region. In particular, it should put the bases in South Korea at the top of the list for potential closure. Moreover, Washington should indulge the Japanese political impulse that allows them to free ride on the US military commitment while various Japanese political factions complain endlessly about the US presence in the country. If Japanese public opinion really is opposed to allowing America to pay for Japan's defense, Washington should use that reality to remove its troops from Japan. Washington should not want to defend Japan more than Japan wants to be defended.

### **Potential Objections to the Alternative Strategy**

There are three main objections to the approach described above. First, one could argue that while US allies in the region would attempt to balance Chinese power, they simply could not keep up; the growth in Chinese economic and military power is too much for them to match. Second, one could object that if the United States were to create distance from its allies, they would not balance against Chinese power but would instead bandwagon with China.<sup>31</sup> Finally, one could argue that Asian countries can and would balance against Chinese power, but that this would create dangerous arms races that threaten to result in war. I deal with these objections below, showing that Asian countries could place significant obstacles in the way of Chinese hegemony in the region, that they would likely do so, and that the risk of war under that scenario is not grave.

#### **Objection One: Other Countries Cannot Effectively Balance against China**

The first objection to a more restrained US security policy in Asia is that America's Asian allies are too weak to balance against China effectively. This argument relies on a number of ideas, mainly about economics, demographics, and military power. Military power depends on economics and demographics, so the argument usually runs that because of economic and demographic constraints, even relatively wealthy countries in Asia would have difficulty converting their wealth into military power to hedge against Chinese adventur-

ism. Accordingly, dealing with this objection involves examining the economic, demographic, and military realities in Asia.

**Economic indicators.** While accurately predicting economic output is notoriously difficult, basic assumptions about future economic trends are required to formulate policy. Economic forecasts for Asia vary wildly, but there is general agreement that Asia—and particularly China and India—will continue to grow in economic clout in the coming decades. The table below shows the projections of one recent report from Goldman Sachs:

**Table 6.1. GDP estimates (constant \$2010 billions)**

<i>Country</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2030</i>	<i>Percent Growth</i>
China	5,633	31,731	563%
United States	14,614	22,920	157%
India	1,594	7,972	500%
Japan	4,773	5,852	123%
Russia	1,689	4,730	280%
Indonesia	692	2,446	353%
South Korea	1,014	2,112	208%
Australia	1,191	1,802	151%
Thailand	302	904	299%
Malaysia	235	889	378%
Philippines	186	793	426%

*Adapted from Timothy Moe, Caesar Maasry, and Richard Tang, EM [Emerging Market] Equity in Two Decades: A Changing Landscape, Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper no. 204 (New York: Goldman Sachs & Co., 8 September 2010), 13.*

It is worth reiterating that making these sorts of forecasts well is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, but the projection above is far from an outlier.

Still, the same report estimates that although China is likely to possess approximately 23 percent of world GDP in 2030, the other countries in Asia will constitute 22 percent of world GDP, with the United States possessing 17 percent.<sup>32</sup> This should allow a significant amount of burden shifting, given the geography of Asia and China's own demographic, economic, and domestic political problems.

Economic growth in the countries of Asia will provide merely the foundations on which these nations can develop national power. Economic growth is determined by gains in productivity (which are extraordinarily difficult to predict) as well as demographics (much

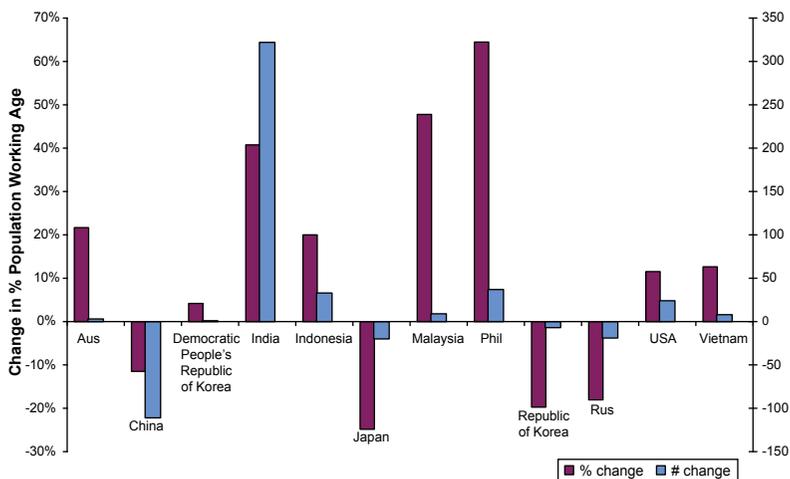
easier to predict). And economic power is relevant in large part because it can be used to develop military power. Below I examine demographic and military spending trends in Asia.

**Demographic trends.** Demographics have played a central role in international politics for centuries. The interaction between the size and composition of national populations with geography, economic output, and military power has helped to make the modern world. Today, most developed countries have seen advances in medical technology combine with shifting cultural mores to produce increased life expectancy and fewer babies—the productive workers of tomorrow.<sup>33</sup> This trend has posed important problems for fiscal programs instituted under earlier, different demographic distributions. Countries have dealt with this issue in different ways, from attempting to provide financial incentives for families to have children, to allowing for increased immigration to import workers in order to prop up welfare states.

Individual nations in Asia face different demographic challenges. Russia, for example, confronts remarkably low life expectancy, net decrease in population, and a generally bleak demographic picture overall. As Nicholas Eberstadt points out, Russia's population has shrunk by more than 7 million people since 1992, and the life expectancy of a Russian boy born today is lower than it was in the 1950s.<sup>34</sup> In stark contrast, countries like Japan and South Korea have populations that are living exceptionally long by world standards, with smaller percentages of their overall populations comprised of working-age citizens.<sup>35</sup> Japan, especially, faces a challenging situation. By 2040, 14 percent of the Japanese population is projected to be 80 years of age or older, and its working-age population will drop 30 percent, placing significant stress on its economy and its pension and health systems.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, South Korea's entire working-age population will be barely larger than its over-60 population by 2050.<sup>37</sup> Figure 6.1 indicates the shifting percentages and numbers of working-age populations from 2010 through 2040.

In China the net effect of Beijing's "one-child" policy, combined with increasing life expectancy in the country, has been the creation of a population bubble that is currently middle-aged but by 2040 will decrease the working-age population by over 110 million, or 11 percent of its overall population.<sup>38</sup> This shift has produced, among other things, a ballooning eldercare industry that appears likely to consume increasing shares of Chinese economic output in the coming decades.<sup>39</sup>

Those issues could pose significant constraints on Chinese domestic economic and foreign policies in the decades ahead.



**Figure 6.1. Working-age population change, 2010–40.** (Reprinted from UN Population Division, *World Population Prospects, 2010 revision* [medium variant], [http://esa.un.org/wpp/unpp/panel\\_population.htm](http://esa.un.org/wpp/unpp/panel_population.htm).)

India, by contrast, has its highest concentration of population in a significantly younger cohort, which should allow it significantly more room for maneuver in its policy choices, particularly when compared to China. For example, the gap between India and China in terms of working-age populations will be roughly 400 million in India's favor by 2040. By 2030 India will possess roughly 100 million young men with at least a high school education, compared to only 75 million in China.<sup>40</sup> These demographic realities should lead Washington to expect India to play a greater security role in the Asia-Pacific.

The demographic developments in many of America's Asian allies, contrasted with the United States' relatively benign demographic condition, hold important consequences for America's military posture in Asia as well. As a recent report from the RAND Corporation notes, demographic trends in Asia make clear that if America seeks to keep its alliance system intact in the coming decades, it will need to "become an even more dominant partner" in the alliances than it is today—a prospect that when coupled with China's growing power

implies both an even larger overall cost and a greater share of that larger cost accruing to Washington.<sup>41</sup>

But despite Japan's terrible predicament, the demographic picture in the Asia-Pacific hardly precludes other states from playing larger roles in securing their region. Countries like India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam all can and should be expected to play a larger role. While Japan faces significant problems posed by economic and demographic challenges over the coming decades, it possesses advanced military technology, favorable geography, and, in extremis, the option of pursuing a "porcupine" strategy with a nuclear deterrent at its core. Japan's lack of any meaningful land warfare capability and severe fiscal and demographic constraints should lessen fears that Japan would use such a posture as a shield for an offensive strategy.<sup>42</sup> In addition, Japan may wish to work in concert with more demographically vital states to marry Japanese technology with manpower from these other states.

**Military modernization in Asia.** Economics and demographics are merely the foundations for America's security concerns in Asia. Washington focuses almost entirely on China's growing power. China has undergone an important qualitative and quantitative military transformation in the past decades. And in discussions about Asia in Washington, it is mostly China's military that looms large. China is presently increasing its capability to coerce Taiwan and to secure its SLOCs and, in general, is sowing fears that it may develop the ability to execute anti-access/area-denial campaigns to prevent the US military from being able to dominate East Asia.<sup>43</sup>

Importantly, geography and technology mean that other countries in Asia would not necessarily need to spend a dollar for a dollar to ensure their security in the face of Chinese economic and military growth. To the contrary, the fact that China's potential challenges are divided between maritime powers like Japan and land powers like India, Russia, South (and potentially North) Korea, and Vietnam means that China would need to field powerful ground forces in numerous areas as well as a powerful navy to establish anything like a Monroe Doctrine in Asia.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Asian states would not necessarily need to field militaries that could defeat China outright. Instead, they could focus merely on raising the potential costs to China such that Beijing would be deterred from aggression against its neighbors.

In short, neither economics, nor demographics, nor military developments prove that Asian states could not provide a sufficient first

line of defense against Chinese ambition. Should the United States do less to provide their security, there is reason to believe they would do more. Below I examine the idea that while Asian states could act as the frontline balancers, they would choose not to.

### **Objection Two: Other Countries Will Not Effectively Balance against China**

The second potential objection to a more standoffish US policy on Asian security is theoretical: namely, that regardless of their capabilities, current US allies—as suggested above—would not increase their own efforts to hedge against Chinese power but instead would appease China, leaving their security at the mercy of the Chinese leadership. This is one side of a long-standing debate in security studies over whether states tend to balance against or bandwagon with power.<sup>45</sup> Without delving too deeply into theory, the objection is based on a particular theory and can only be answered on theoretical grounds and supplemented with evidence from history.

States that value survival will tend to balance against the power of potential rivals, although not always efficiently enough to prevent wars. If one views the international system as a competitive one in which security is frequently a zero-sum good between neighbors or rivals, states tend to balance against power to ensure control over their own destinies or, in extreme cases, their survival as political units. While these views are sometimes hard for Americans to understand—America’s survival as an autonomous political unit has not been threatened in at least 200 years—they are far less difficult to appreciate for countries in other regions of the world.

Criteria for a nation’s tendency to balance—such as consensus among elites about the nature of the threat, government vulnerability, and social cohesion—lead one to expect Japan to cohere and work to defend itself.<sup>46</sup> In fact, there is considerable evidence that all affected countries in Asia would be willing to do more to ensure their own security were America to do less on their behalf. Such evidence includes the recent joint statement issued by the Philippines and Japan marking a new “strategic partnership” and expressing “common strategic interests” such as “ensuring the safety of sea lines of communication.”<sup>47</sup> More recently, as the Japanese prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda declared that Japan’s security environment had grown “increasingly murky due to China’s stepped-up activities in local waters and

its rapid military expansion.”<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the head of the Indian navy remarked that in the face of Chinese provocations there, “the South China Sea is an area of significant concern” for India.<sup>49</sup> A recent review of Australia’s defense posture sounded similarly wary notes.<sup>50</sup>

These are only the most recent indications that other countries in the region would hardly shrug at Chinese power in the absence of US security guarantees. They see China as potentially threatening and would do more on their own without a security subsidy from Washington. Instead, Washington’s constant repetition of its commitment to its allies’ security allows these countries to avoid the necessary domestic debates about their security environments and what to do about them.<sup>51</sup>

### **Objection Three: Other Countries Can and Would Balance against China, but That Would Be More Problematic than the Current Approach**

A final objection to restraint in the Asia-Pacific allows that America’s Asian allies could and likely would choose to balance against China but argues that their doing so would cause dangerous arms racing in the region that would not result if America continued to shelter its allies. Accordingly, goes the logic—even at the cost of carrying a disproportionate share of the burden—it is better for Washington to take the lead on constraining China rather than cultivating dangerously destabilizing arms races that would encourage direct security competition among Asian states and with it a greater chance of war.

The most plausible version of this argument points out that the allure of a nuclear deterrent would be extremely powerful for a country like Japan. This argument raises questions about the implications of potential Japanese acquisition of its own nuclear deterrent on other countries in the region and the nuclear nonproliferation treaty itself.<sup>52</sup> It would also be helpful to point out that any prospective Japanese nuclear arsenal could serve only as a deterrent, since Japan lacks any meaningful ground warfare capability and faces severe demographic pressures that would make even a nuclear-armed Japan terrifically unlikely to attempt to replay the 1930s. Furthermore, China has its own nuclear deterrent and a massive conventional deterrent, both of which would give pause to any potential adversary.

More broadly, this objection fails to spell out why, exactly, regional balancing is clearly more risky to the United States than is America

continuing to act as the balancer of first resort. As highlighted above, states in the region like Japan, whose rearmament is frequently rolled out as dangerously destabilizing, possess important demographic and economic constraints on their potential to generate power-projection capabilities. In other words, while countries in the region could do significantly more to enhance their ability to defend against potential Chinese aggression, no country has a realistic prospect at threatening Chinese territory. Put simply, Asian geography and the military requirements for producing security to current US client states favor defense.

## Conclusion

This chapter argues that the Beltway foreign-policy establishment has flawed views on the rise of China and US China policy. That perception produces an inherently counterproductive policy: conengagement. The flaws of conengagement are coupled with the problem created by reassurance: free riding. In addition to shining a light on those misguided policies, this discussion suggests that questions remain about the future implications of demographic and economic change in the region, the impact of those changes on the ability and willingness of nations there to balance Chinese power, and the likely results of their doing so.

The Pentagon's plan to rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific will likely exacerbate those policy woes. The contradictions of conengagement present the military with an unenviable task: consider China the primary adversary of the United States while the rest of the government encourages and enriches that adversary through trade and the financing of debt. Furthermore, due to continual American reassurance, our allies may struggle to perform as reliable partners in a future conflict, much as NATO countries did in Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya.

In the coming years, Navy and especially Air Force assets are likely to bear the burden of those flawed policies. Air-Sea Battle, though not overtly aimed at China, is clearly meant as a response to Chinese anti-access/area-denial threats. Air Force efforts in long-range strike; cyber warfare; and over-the-horizon intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance will be key to fulfilling the execution of that con-

cept—a concept designed to maintain a US military posture that is unfortunately built on unsound ideas about how the world works.

Moreover, as China continues to narrow the relative power gap between itself and the United States, China's ambitions are likely to grow, and America's ability to limit them is likely to shrink. The Air Force will be on the front lines of the Sino-US competition in the coming years. Therefore, while getting US China policy right is important for the country in general, it should be a particular concern for the men and women of the US Air Force.

### Notes

1. Department of Defense (DOD), *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: DOD, January 2012), 2, [http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense\\_Strategic\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf).

2. Gen Norton A. Schwartz, USAF, and Adm Jonathan W. Greenert, USN, "Air-Sea Battle: Promoting Stability in an Era of Uncertainty," *American Interest*, 20 February 2012, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1212>.

3. Some will no doubt object that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the September 11 attacks were hugely consequential events produced by non-state actors. While true on its face, this line of argument fails to juxtapose the impact of the events themselves against the enormity of the responses to them, which were produced by states. The supposed exceptions in fact prove the rule.

4. "How to Get a Date," *Economist*, 31 December 2011, 61, <http://www.economist.com/node/21542155>.

5. For an early formulation of this view, see Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959): 69–105.

6. In fairness to theorists of the democratic peace, it should be reiterated that this is a significantly dumbed-down application of their theory. On the democratic peace itself, see Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

7. On liberal institutionalist logic, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

8. G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 1 (January/February 2008): 37.

9. Richard Halloran, "Pacific Push," *Air Force Magazine* 94, no. 1 (January 2011): 46–50.

10. Maj Lawrence Spinetta, USAF, "'The Malacca Dilemma': Countering China's 'String of Pearls' with Land-Based Airpower" (master's thesis, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL, June 2006), <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA476931>.

11. Dennis Blair and Kenneth Lieberthal, "Smooth Sailing: The World's Shipping Lanes Are Safe," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 3 (May/June 2007): 12.

12. See Zalmay M. Khalilzad et al., *The United States and a Rising China: Strategic and Military Implications*, RAND Corporation Monograph MR-1082-AF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/2007/MR1082.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2007/MR1082.pdf).

13. “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament” (address, Canberra, Australia, 17 November 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

14. Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 184.

15. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 271–72.

16. Jennifer M. Lind, “Pacifism or Passing the Buck? Testing Theories of Japanese Security Policy,” *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 92–121.

17. Victor D. Cha, “Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia,” *International Security* 34, no. 3 (Winter 2009/2010): 158–96.

18. Christopher Layne, “America as European Hegemon,” *The National Interest*, no. 72 (Summer 2003): 17–29; Peter Liberman, “Ties That Bind: Will Germany and Japan Rely Too Much on the United States?,” *Security Studies* 10, no. 2 (Winter 2000/2001): 98–138.

19. On active discussions about fighting China within the Pentagon, see Andrew Burt and Christopher J. Castelli, “Despite Improved Ties, China Weighs Heavily in Pentagon War Planning: Team Links AirSea Battle to China,” *Inside the Navy*, 13 June 2011.

20. One recent study from the RAND Corporation suggests that in the event of a war, China could potentially ground the entire Taiwan air force before it could get into the air by cutting all of the runways at Taiwan’s fighter bases. See David A. Shlapak et al., *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009). On Taiwan’s military efforts, see Justin Logan and Ted Galen Carpenter, “Taiwan’s Defense Budget: How Taipei’s Free Riding Risks War,” *Cato Institute Policy Analysis* no. 600, 13 September 2007.

21. Shyu-tu Lee and Douglas Paal, “Responses: Disengaging from Taiwan: Should Washington Continue Its Alliance with Taipei?,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (July/August 2011): 179–80.

22. Logan and Carpenter, “Taiwan’s Defense Budget.”

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25. Michael Schiffer, “China’s Military Modernization” (speech, Center for the National Interest, Washington, DC, 27 July 2011).

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32. Timothy Moe, Caesar Maasry, and Richard Tang, *EM [Emerging Market] Equity in Two Decades: A Changing Landscape*, Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper no. 204 (New York: Goldman Sachs & Co., 8 September 2010), 13.
33. Mark L. Haas, "A Geriatric Peace? The Future of U.S. Power in a World of Aging Populations," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 112–47.
34. Nicholas Eberstadt, "Asia-Pacific Demographics in 2010–2040: Implications for Strategic Balance," in *Strategic Asia 2010–11: Asia's Rising Power and America's Continued Purpose*, eds. Ashley J. Tellis, Andrew Marble, and Travis Tanner (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2010), 250–52.
35. Demographers define *working age* as the group of a nation's citizens between 15 and 64.
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37. Jack A. Goldstone, "The New Population Bomb: The Four Megatrends That Will Change the World," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 1 (January/February 2010): 34.
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42. On Japan's inability to project power on land (or indeed even to fight on land at home), see Lind, "Pacifism or Passing the Buck?," 96–97.
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84–119. See also Robert S. Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response,” *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 46–81.

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