The Stanley Foundation

Policy Analysis Brief

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A Realist Policy for Managing US-China Competition

Policy Prescriptions

1. When crafting US foreign and security policies toward East Asia, do not assume that the rise of China will entail Cold War hostilities. Avoid US policies that would lead toward economic, political, and military polarization of Asia into two adversarial blocs.
2. Attempt to create a strategic environment of "managed competition" between the United States and China that simultaneously minimizes regional instabilities, avoids escalated tension over US-China conflicts of interest, and realizes vital US security interests such as the consolidation of its bilateral alliances and long-term maritime presence in East Asia.
3. Toward these ends:
   - Continue to focus the US presence in East Asia on maritime power rather than land-based security. Emphasize those military programs that strengthen US military presence in maritime East Asia, far from Chinese territory.
   - Accept a greater diplomatic, economic, and political role for China within East Asia—in those cases where China can positively contribute to greater regional stability and prosperity.
   - Avoid diplomatic and military policies that encourage Taiwanese independence, while continuing to ensure Taiwan's security and its political and economic autonomy.

Dr. Robert S. Ross

Robert S. Ross is a professor of Political Science, Boston College; associate, John King Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, Harvard University; and senior advisor, Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His current research focuses on Chinese security policy and US-China relations, with a focus on Chinese use of force and deterrence in East Asia. Among his recent publications is U.S.-China Relations, 1955-1971: A Reexamination of Cold War Conflict and Cooperation, *coeditor (Asia Center, Harvard University, 2001).*

Introduction

Putting US-China Great Power Relations in Context

The most successful great power foreign policies achieve two objectives simultaneously. They secure a nation's vital interests and they manage great power competition to reduce the likelihood of heightened tension, regional instability, and war.

This has been the greatest challenge to American foreign policy since the United States became a great power at the turn of the twentieth century, as it developed policies first toward Germany and then toward the Soviet Union. In the first case, protecting American security required war. In the second case, it required participation in a protracted arms race, nuclear crises, and wars in peripheral regions. In both cases, all of Europe suffered in the context of great power conflict.

In the twenty-first century, despite the emergence of regional competitors; global terrorist groups with

anti-globalization or anti-Western agendas; and an apparent surge in "nontraditional," transnational challenges such as criminal rings, drug networks, and small arms smuggling, America must still protect its security in more traditional great power competitions while trying to avoid costly regional instabilities. In this case, the preeminent challenge is to develop a successful foreign and defense policy toward a rising China.

Chinese Power and American Interests

Over the next 10 to 20 years, continued growth in China's GDP will assure that even if Beijing maintains a modest defense budget, its absolute defense spending will grow at a rapid rate and its annual budget will enable significant increases in arms procurement. Simultaneously, modernization of the Chinese economy will enable domestic production of increasingly sophisticated advanced weaponry. Complementing the growth of Chinese military power is the rapid and ongoing expansion of Chinese international economic influence. As its international market power has expanded and its accumulation of direct foreign investment has grown, China has become an increasingly more important source of economic growth than the United States for nearly every East Asian economy.

As China becomes more powerful, it will seek greater security by developing greater influence over its international environment.

The continued rise of Chinese military and economic power could pose a significant challenge to the strategic status quo in East Asia and to US security interests. As China becomes more powerful, it will seek greater security by developing greater influence over its international environment. China's capabilities—more than its history, culture, or domestic politics—will shape its regional aspirations. Should greater Chinese capabilities enable Beijing to challenge US strategic relationships in East Asia and thus diminish US strategic presence, the likelihood for both heightened US-China conflict and regionwide instability will grow.

The rise of China into the waterways of East Asia and a corresponding Chinese ability to challenge US strategic partnerships in the East Asian littoral would pose a critical challenge to US security. It would likely lead to escalated US-China great power conflict as the United States took steps to "roll back" Chinese power in order to consolidate its regional presence and maintain a divided region. East Asia would become polarized as the great powers challenged the strategic status quo and their competition for allies throughout the region increased.

In such a conflictual environment, there would also be a greater likelihood of a costly US-China naval arms race and increased competition for access to the naval facilities of the local powers. Escalated US-China strategic competition could also derail much of the economic success that East Asia has experienced over the past 25 years as local powers diverted their political and economic resources to managing an insecure regional environment.

Managing Competition to Avoid Worst Outcomes

None of the above trends are inevitable. A polarized East Asia engulfed in US-China conflict would reflect a failure of Washington and Beijing to manage their

great power competition. The United States cannot alone determine the course of US-China relations; Chinese policy is critical to a stable great power relationship. But US strategy will play an important role in the future development of Asian security. If the United States manages its China policy well, it will have at least created an opportunity for a stable US-China great power relationship.

The contemporary strategic challenge for the United States is to develop a China policy that simultaneously realizes vital US security interests in East Asia, allows for manageable US-China strategic conflict, and minimizes regional instability. *There are no inherent contradictions between these objectives.* The experience of recent great power conflicts such as the US-Soviet Cold War does not necessarily portend violent US-China conflict. Each era of great competition reflects the unique characteristics of the region of competition and the unique interests of each of the great powers. East Asia is not Europe, and China is neither pre-World War II Germany nor post-World War II Soviet Union.

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Simply put: the United States and China are destined to be great power competitors. They are now the two most capable countries in the world, and thus their respective capabilities will naturally make them suspicious of each other's intentions. Moreover, the United States and China interact in East Asia, a region of vital strategic importance to both countries. And East Asia is already the world's most dynamic economic region, and its share of global trade will continue to grow. *Thus the issue for the United States and China is not whether they will be great power competitors but whether, as they pursue their respective security interests, they can manage their competition to avoid the high economic and military costs of great power competitions of the recent past.*

Analysis

Assuring US Strategic Interests While Managing Competition and Maintaining Regional Stability

The United States has one clear and overriding security interest in East Asia: the region must be divided by two or more great powers. This is the same vital security interest that the US possesses in Europe. East Asia and Europe constitute the two "flanking regions" of the United States. If these regions remain divided between contending great powers, then a regional power will not be able to achieve regional hegemony and focus its resources on the oceans bordering the United States, thereby threatening the US homeland.

Differentiating Between Europe and East Asia, Past and Present

In the past, as a small power, the United States depended on the great powers to assure divided flanking regions and secure maritime borders. As a great power, the United States has assumed this responsibility for itself. It fought Germany in World War I and Germany and Japan in World War II to secure great power divisions in

its flanking regions. It waged the Cold War in Europe for similar reasons. In the twenty-first century, America's foremost security policy is to maintain a divided East Asia during the era of a rising China.

A divided Europe has required a US military presence on the continent. A great power competitor's domination of the entire peninsula would lead to British accommodation and US exclusion from the entire region. This requirement contributed to many aspects of the great power conflict during the Cold War, including protracted US ground force deployments in West Germany, persistent US fear of a surprise Soviet offensive, more than 40 years of constant high-level US war readiness, numerous US-Soviet crises, and the conventional and nuclear superpower arms races.

In contrast, the US strategic interest in a divided East Asia does not require a US military presence on the East Asian mainland. The United States did not fight the Korean War and the Vietnam War to preserve a land-based presence that was vital to US security. The United States instead fought both wars to maintain its global credibility to resist communist expansion wherever and whenever it occurred.

The United States has reconciled itself to a secondary role on the Korean peninsula.

In the run-up to the Korean War, the United States had already withdrawn its forces from South Korea and relegated management of the North-South relations to the United Nations. However, North Korea's attack on South Korea challenged US resolve and thus elicited an immediate and resolute US response.

US intervention in the Vietnam conflict similarly reflected American concern for credibility in the global fight against communist influence. Having committed itself to the defense of South Vietnam, Washington feared that a communist victory over South Vietnam would undermine US alliances throughout East Asia. This was the underlying logic of the domino theory of communist expansion that was prevalent at the time in US politics. The tragedy of the Vietnam War was that despite the US defeat in Vietnam and Soviet-Vietnamese dominance of Indochina, America was no less secure for the remaining two decades of the Cold War.

Resolving Cold War Conflicts

Today the last outpost of US presence on the East Asia mainland is South Korea. Yet the rise of China is diminishing the US presence throughout the peninsula. China has replaced the United States as South Korea's largest export market and as its most important target of foreign investment. The modernization of the Chinese ground forces poses a growing challenge to American ability to provide for South Korean security. And the shadow of unification presents Seoul with the prospect of a common border with China and its large army.

The result has been declining US-South Korean cooperation regarding North Korea. While Washington calls for continued economic and diplomatic isolation of North Korea and attempts coercive diplomacy to compel Pyongyang to give up its nuclear program, Seoul has become North Korea's largest source of

economic assistance. South Korea routinely undermines US threats of use of force, and it has had closer cooperation with China regarding North Korea than with the United States.

The United States has reconciled itself to a secondary role on the Korean peninsula. It is ceding to China more and more responsibility for managing North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and it is reducing its troop presence in South Korea. The peaceful strategic transformation of the Korean peninsula is slowly but surely enabling the United States to disengage from one of the most dangerous conflict regions in the world. It also diminishes US military presence on the Chinese border, thus easing a major source of US-China conflict. Moreover, it achieves both these results at minimal cost to US security.

Consolidating US Maritime Presence in East Asia

The transformation of the US presence on the Korean peninsula is an important part of America's post-Cold War transition toward becoming an East Asian maritime power. "Maritime Asia" is where US strategic presence is required in order to pursue its vital interest in a divided region. Unlike in Europe, Maritime Asia possesses a sufficiently large littoral to allow for access to naval facilities on the perimeter of the entire East Asian mainland. Whereas Europe's major off-shore geography is limited to Great Britain, the East Asian littoral includes Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. Both their location and their size enable the United States to possess a regional military presence sufficient to contend with another great power within East Asian waters rather than within Pacific maritime regions closer to US coastal regions.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, American strategic attention shifted...to balancing Chinese power in East Asia.

To secure its interest in a divided Asia and to prevent a Chinese challenge to US maritime interests, the United States must possess sufficient naval presence both to maintain maritime dominance and to reassure its traditional security partners that it can defend their security well into the twenty-first century. Despite the modernization of the Chinese military and the emerging dominance of Chinese economic presence in East Asia, the United States has thus far successfully pursued these two objectives.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, American strategic attention shifted from balancing Soviet power in Europe to balancing Chinese power in East Asia. This effort in part included a redeployment of US Cold War capabilities from Europe to East Asia. Since then, US naval presence in the region has grown. In addition to the Kitty Hawk, recent defense budgets allocate funding for increased US carrier presence in East Asia. The United States has also obtained greater access to naval facilities in the region. The completion in March 2001 of Singapore's Change port facility and Tokyo's recent agreement to allow the United States to base a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in Japan are important elements in this process.

The United States' regional submarine presence is growing. Washington has deployed three Los Angeles class nuclear-powered attack submarines at Guam and plans to deploy an additional three submarines. Development and deployment in East Asia of nuclear-powered guided-missile submarines will similarly enhance US regional defense capability. These converted Trident ballistic missile submarines will be able to launch as many as 154 precision-guided Tomahawk land-attack missiles and deploy special operation forces.

The United States is also improving its forward presence of air power in East Asia. In August 2002 the United States began stockpiling conventional air-launched cruise missiles at Andersen Air Force base on Guam. The Air Force is building an operations center to serve the entire Pacific on Guam. It has deployed a squadron of B-2 bombers as part of the development of a regional strike force, which will also include 48 fighter jets redeployed from continental US bases, as well as 12 refueling aircraft, supplementing US carrier-based aircraft and US aircraft on Japan. The Air Force also plans to deploy Global Hawk unmanned reconnaissance aircraft on Guam.

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As the United States has increased its military presence in maritime East Asia, it has mobilized its domestic resources to expand its global and regional power. During the early stages of the post-Cold War era, US defense spending was more than the next six or seven countries' defense budgets combined. Since then, US defense spending has dramatically increased, so that by 2005 the defense budget was nearly the sum of the rest of the world's defense budgets combined.

The United States has been building new aircraft carriers. The Harry S. Truman and the Ronald Reagan were put to sea in the late 1990s. The Pentagon will soon acquire its next generation aircraft, the F/A22, which is far superior to any Russian or Chinese aircraft. It has also continued to modernize its long-range, precision-guided missiles. The advances in precision-guided weaponry from the 1991 Gulf War to the 2003 war in Iraq are significant.

While expanding its regional deployments and modernizing its forces, the United States has been consolidating its regional partnerships, despite the modernization of the Chinese military and the growth of Chinese economic influence. US-Japan military cooperation is greater today than at any time during the Cold War. As early as 1995, Tokyo agreed to revised guidelines for the US-Japan alliance, facilitating closer wartime coordination between the Japanese and US militaries, including use by the United States of Japanese territory in case of war with a third country. Since then, Japan has become the most active US partner in the development of missile defense technologies. It has agreed to a five-year plan for US-Japan joint production of a missile defense system, and it will contribute $10 billion by the end of the decade.

Japanese defense policy now reflects the possibility of war with China, and the Japanese Defense Agency now publicly refers to a potential Chinese challenge to Japanese security. Tokyo has also adopted a more assertive posture on islands and territorial waters claimed by China and Japan. It is developing surface-to-surface missiles, reportedly to defend these disputed islands; it will build a radar facility on the islands; and it has begun allocating licenses for gas exploration in the disputed waters.

The United States is also consolidating security relations with its Southeast Asian partners. In addition to expanding military cooperation with Singapore, it is improving defense ties with the Philippines. In 1999 the Philippines reached a Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, permitting US forces to hold exercises in the Philippines. Since then, the size of US participation in joint exercises has steadily expanded, doubling between 2003 and 2004. In addition, the focus of the exercises has expanded beyond antiterrorist activities to include US participation in amphibious exercises in the vicinity of the Spratly Islands, which both Beijing and Manila claim as their territory. In late 2004, the US and Philippine air forces conducted joint exercises using the former US base at the Clark Air Field. Since 2001 annual US military assistance to the Philippines increased from $1.9 million to a projected $126 million in 2005, and the Philippines is now the largest recipient of US military assistance in East Asia. Manila is also planning to purchase US fighter planes. Whereas for most of the 1990s the Philippines was hostile to the US military, it is now a "major non-NATO ally" with an expanding US presence on its territory.

The US-China ...relationship appears to offer far greater opportunities to manage competition than was true with the US-Soviet superpower relationship.

In sum, it has been more than 15 years since the demise of the Soviet Union and the onset of the rise of China, but there has yet to emerge a new cold war in East Asia. The US-China great power relationship appears to offer far greater opportunities to manage competition than was true with the US-Soviet superpower relationship. Even as the United States has consolidated defense cooperation with Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines and expanded its naval and air presence throughout the region, China has offered only minimal opposition. In part this is because the United States is considerably superior to China in maritime capabilities, which reflects both US military efforts to respond to the rise of China and China's relatively backward technological and financial base for maritime competition. It would be folly for China to attempt to compete with the United States for naval power in East Asia.

But China's relatively complacent posture also reflects the fact that the US maritime strategy neither poses a significant threat to Chinese territorial integrity nor gives the United States the ability to launch a debilitating surprise attack against Chinese ground forces. The US maritime buildup is occurring far from Chinese territory and offers US forces minimal offensive capabilities in mainland theaters on Chinese borders, where Chinese ground forces possess superiority. Thus whereas India and Thailand, for example, have acquired aircraft carriers, China has resisted the temptation to acquire this symbol of great power status, apparently aware that it is not

necessary to protect its territorial security and that it would needlessly contribute to heightened US-China tension.

The result of American strategic prioritization of maritime East Asia is minimal great power pressures for arms competition and use of force. In contrast to the US-Soviet Cold War competition and to US-China hostilities in the 1950s and 1960s, in the twenty-first century, despite the rise of China, there has yet to develop a US-China arms race, and there has not been a US-China crisis. Similarly, pressures for great power nuclear arms competition have been minimal. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has actively balanced the rise of China and maintained maritime dominance throughout East Asia, all without contributing to either heightened great power tension or to regional instability. This is a major accomplishment.

Threading the Needle: Maintaining Stability in the Taiwan Strait

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Despite the promising trends in US-China relations, conflict over Taiwan remains a potential source of heightened tension. It has the potential to cause crises and war. As in the case of its security policy for East Asia, the United States should seek a Taiwan policy that both achieves its strategic interests and that mitigates the likelihood of US-China arms races, crises, and war.

Mainland China has made clear that should Taiwan declare de jure independence, it would use force to return Taiwan to mainland sovereignty. Not only would Chinese leaders resist what they would see as a separatist movement abetted by another power, but they would view a Taiwan declaration of independence as a challenge to China's 50-year commitment to regain Taiwan. Thus this development would directly challenge the credibility of the People's Republic of China throughout East Asia. Moreover, it would challenge PRC nationalist credentials inside China, risking the survival of the Chinese Communist Party.

Fortunately, the United States has minimal interest in whether Taiwan is a sovereign state or legally part of the PRC. Since Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972, every US president, including William Clinton and George W. Bush, has insisted that the United States does not support Taiwan independence. On the contrary, when Taiwan leaders have risked instability by moving toward de jure independence, US presidents have publicly criticized them. Most recently, President George W. Bush criticized Taiwan during a public meeting at the White House with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

Nor does the United States have a significant interest in opposing the unification of Taiwan with the mainland. Even Chinese occupation of Taiwan would only extend mainland power projection 100 miles into the Pacific Ocean. The challenge to US naval security and the sea lanes of communication would be minimal. This has been clear since 1949, when the United States prepared for the victory of the Chinese Communist Party, the fall of the Republic of China government on Taiwan, and Taiwan incorporation into mainland China.

Since then, US policy has consistently called for the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue, an indication that the outcome of the cross-strait conflict is not critical to American security. *US security interest in the Taiwan issue is limited to resisting Chinese use of force against Taiwan.* This reflects Washington's 55-year commitment to defend Taiwan. Should the mainland use force against Taiwan, the United States might be compelled to intervene militarily against Chinese forces in order to protect Taiwan's democracy, US reputation in East Asia, and the cohesion of US regional alliance relationships, including the US-Japan alliance. Thus the challenge for the United States is to maintain its deterrent of Chinese use of force without suggesting to either Beijing or Taipei that it is encouraging Taiwan independence.

This is not difficult. In fact, the United States has built strong foundations for the management of the Taiwan issue over the past 20 years. First, public diplomacy can make clear the distinction in US policy between resisting PRC use of force and supporting Taiwan independence. This serves to constrain Taiwan from moving toward de jure independence while allowing the United States to protect Taiwan's security, democracy, and economic prosperity.

...robust US deterrence of mainland use of force does not require arms sales to Taiwan to signal the credibility of US resolve.

It also enables Taiwan's democratic process to determine Taiwan's long-term political relationship with the mainland. After initial hesitation at the beginning of their presidencies, and a corresponding challenge by Taiwan's leaders to cross-strait stability, both President Clinton and President George W. Bush adopted just this policy. In each case, Taiwan adopted a more cautious mainland policy, without risk to Taiwan's security.

Second, the United States needs to develop a defense policy for Taiwan that deters mainland use of force but that does not undercut US diplomacy by suggesting support for Taiwan independence. An optimum US arms sales package would contribute to the defense of Taiwan, rather than be used for political purposes to signal to China the US commitment to defend Taiwan. It would thus minimize any suggestion of US military intervention on behalf of Taiwan in the event that Taipei issues a declaration of independence. Such a defense policy is feasible because robust US deterrence of mainland use of force does not require arms sales to Taiwan to signal the credibility of US resolve.

US deterrence of mainland use of force rests on Washington's credible commitment to the defense of Taiwan and overwhelming US military superiority in the Taiwan maritime theater. Chinese leaders understand that the likelihood of US intervention is high and that the military and the political costs to the PRC would be devastating. China's ongoing progress in military modernization has not changed their calculation. In this strategic context, US arms sales to Taiwan are not necessary to enhance PRC evaluation of the US defense commitment to Taiwan. US policies should instead focus on helping Taiwan contribute to its own defense.

Nonetheless, the Bush administration's 2001 arms sales package for Taiwan reflected political concerns, rather than Taiwan defense needs. The administration seemed intent on signaling to China that it was more determined than the Clinton administration to resist PRC use of force, and that Beijing should not underestimate US resolve. The result was an expensive, high-profile, high-technology arms package that did not suit Taiwan's defense needs, but which suggested to both Beijing and Taipei that the United States encouraged Taiwan independence. For example, cutting-edge PAC-3 missile defense systems, which require real-time US-Taiwan intelligence sharing, cannot defend Taiwan against China's numerous and inexpensive short-range ballistic missiles deployed just 90 miles from Taiwan. Similarly, politically sensitive anti-blockade capabilities, including diesel submarines, cannot reduce Taiwan's critical economic vulnerability to mainland bilateral sanctions.

Not surprisingly, more than four years after the Pentagon first offered these systems to Taiwan, the Taiwan legislature has yet to allocate the funding to purchase them. Both the opposition parties and the Taiwan public doubt the military effectiveness of these expensive systems to contend with mainland forces. Senior US military officials—including the commander of the US Pacific Command, Admiral William J. Fallon—have advised Taiwan to reconsider the 2001 US arms package and instead focus on more defensive and less advanced weapons that can better contribute to Taiwan's ability to resist a mainland attack.

Through decades of balanced US policies, the Southeast and Northeast Asian security environments are characterized by high levels of beneficial stability and economic prosperity.

US transfer of less expensive, less advanced, and more defensive weapons to Taiwan would meet the goal of maintaining US maritime dominance while not challenging Chinese territorial integrity, or suggesting support for Taiwan independence. The Pentagon has identified the primary mainland military threat to Taiwan as a short-term barrage of missiles, aircraft, and special forces aimed at destabilizing Taiwan politics and society, which could compel the Taiwan leadership to accept unification on Beijing's terms before the arrival of US forces. Given both this military scenario and the intrinsic limits to Taiwan's defense capability, US military officers have recommended that Taiwan focus on the acquisition of fighter-interceptor jet aircraft, ground-based antiaircraft missiles, attack helicopters, landmines to defend the beaches against an amphibious attack, and transport helicopters to move troops against mainland paratroopers.

Conclusion

Toward Manageable US-China Great Power Competition

Through decades of balanced US policies, the Southeast and Northeast Asian security environments are characterized by high levels of beneficial stability and economic prosperity. The United States therefore has a unique opportunity to pursue its vital strategic interests in East Asia while simultaneously managing US-China competition to avoid escalating conflict and regional instability. It is far from inevitable that the rise of China will lead to a US-China cold war. Of course, the

United States alone cannot determine the course of US-China relations. Beijing must also find a way to pursue its vital interests without impinging on vital US security interests. Nonetheless, current trends in regional security are promising.

On the Korean peninsula, the United States is reducing its troop presence in South Korea, while China is playing a larger role in managing both North Korea's nuclear ambitions and the North-South conflict. In Taiwan, support for de jure independence is rapidly declining as cross-strait economic and societal contacts are rapidly expanding. In both conflicts, the danger of war is declining and peaceful resolution is the trend, reflecting the realization of American policy since World War II. These trends also reduce the prospect for US-China conflict, laying the basis for a more stable great power relationship.

While the US presence on the Korean peninsula is declining and Taiwan is reconsidering its arms sales relationship with the United States and its interest in de jure independence, the United States is consolidating its strategic partnerships and defense deployments in maritime East Asia. Although China cannot be pleased with this latter development, it has not contributed to heightened regional tension. On the contrary, within the US security envelope, there is increasing cooperation between China and US security partners throughout East Asia. For example, even as US strategic presence in Southeast Asia is growing, trade and investment between China and the ASEAN states is growing and regionwide multilateral political cooperation is flourishing, while the salience of territorial disputes is declining. The regional states are not polarizing around the US-China conflict, but are instead participating in a web of cooperative relationships that transcends great power competition.

It is in America's interest that other countries welcome US power, rather than fear it.

Regional security trends enable the United States to adopt a confident posture toward both China and the region. The challenge for the United Sates is to manage its power to minimize other countries' threat perceptions. It is in America's interest that other countries welcome US power, rather than fear it. This is as true for East Asia as it is for Europe and the Middle East.

Given ongoing US maritime superiority and overall regional stability, vocal US domestic attention to the "China threat"—and warnings given to East Asia regarding China's military buildup—merely create suspicions of US intentions in China and throughout the region. Because the strong US maritime presence underpins American security and the region is relatively stable, Washington can continue to secure its regional interests while actively participating in the region's flourishing economic development and multilateral political cooperation.

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The Stanley Foundation
209 Iowa Avenue
Muscatine, IA 52761 USA
563-264-1500
563-264-0864 fax
info@stanleyfoundation.org

Production: Jen Maceyko, Elizabeth Pomeroy-Baierl, and Margo Schneider

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Muscatine, IA 52761 USA

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