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## CHANGING MILITARY DYNAMICS IN EAST ASIA POLICY BRIEF 1, JANUARY 2012

### *The United States' Grand Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region*

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### SUMMARY

The United States has at least since World War II pursued a consistent set of aims in Asia. The United States faces a broad array of threats to its interests, including a protracted conflict with al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the threat posed by regional rogues who will increasingly possess nuclear weapons, and the challenge posed by the rise of China. These threats will continue despite increasingly sharp limits on the resources the United States is willing to devote to defense. Because cutting back commitments is easier said than done, the United States is likely to face a growing gap between its aims and its ability to meet them.

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## U.S. OBJECTIVES

Although the U.S. administrations routinely produce strategy statements, these documents are more often undifferentiated lists of desirable outcomes than prioritized lists of aims and the approaches needed to achieve them. If one looks to U.S. action rather than rhetoric, however, a consistent pattern of behavior in Asia emerges. At least since World War II, the United States has pursued a consistent set of objectives in Asia. These include

1. defending U.S. territory, including the Continental United States, Hawaii, Alaska, Guam, and the Northern Marianas;
2. protecting U.S. allies such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and quasi-allies such as Taiwan;
3. assuring access to the global commons; and
4. preserving a favorable balance of power across Eurasia.

Over the last century, the United States has repeatedly used force when its territory or allies were attacked, and when a would-be hegemon threatened the balance of power in Eurasia.

## CHALLENGES

In the foreseeable future, the United States will likely face three primary challenges; any grand strategy will need to balance its response to them. The first is the ongoing war with al-Qaeda and its affiliates: a protracted conflict with irregular adversaries using unconventional means that spans the globe. The second is the threat nuclear-armed hostile regimes, such as North Korea and prospectively Iran, pose to U.S. allies and the stability of key regions. The third, and most consequential, is the rise of China.

Various administrations have framed these challenges differently and have applied inconsistent rankings in terms of likelihood and impact. Nonetheless, there is a consensus spanning administrations that these are great threats the United States faces and is likely to face in the future. The adequacy of the U.S. forces needs to be measured against the ability to meet these challenges; specifically, to assure U.S. allies and dissuade, deter, and if necessary defeat adversaries.

Over time, it is likely that China will become progressively more important to U.S. national security. Since the end of the Cold War, China has sought to expand its influence in the Western Pacific and constrict that of the United States. The expansion of Chinese military power, which has been underway for

some time now, is already tipping the military balance against the United States and undermining perceptions of the U.S. commitment to the region and security guarantees to our allies. A preponderance of Chinese power in the Western Pacific would also jeopardize the free flow of goods, technology, and resources on which the United States and its allies depend.

## RESOURCES

Each U.S. administration attempts to match desired ends and means within economic constraints. The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) represents the most recent attempt to do so. As the Congressionally-mandated 2010 QDR Independent Panel co-chaired by former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley pointed out, the QDR identified a number of shortfalls in the ability of the United States to protect its interests against the threats described above. These included the need to do more to counter anti-access capabilities, defend the homeland, and bolster U.S. cyber capabilities.

It is axiomatic that states formulate and implement strategy with finite resources. The United States will face increasing constraints in coming years, while China appears to be catching its stride. For reasons of domestic politics as much as economics, resources for, and attention to, national security will likely be limited in coming years. These constraints make it increasingly clear that the United States can no longer seek to reduce risk merely by throwing money at the problem. Similarly, it cannot afford to simply do more of the same. Rather, it is increasingly important for the U.S. government to develop a well-thought-out strategy for competing with China over the long term. Specifically, the United States needs to clarify and prioritize its goals, conduct a net assessment of its enduring strengths and weaknesses, and formulate and implement a strategy to leverage its competitive advantages against a range of competitors. Indeed, only by adopting such a strategy can the United States hope to achieve its objectives.

## BALANCING ENDS, WAYS, AND MEANS

Neither the 2010 QDR nor the QDR Independent Panel anticipated the current budgetary environment. Both counted on budget growth to bridge the gap between U.S. commitments and capabilities. There are growing calls, including from some members of Congress, to institute major cuts in the defense budget. As a result, the United States faces a growing gap between its

commitments and its ability to meet them. In this situation, the United States will face two broad alternatives, either to reduce commitments or accept greater risk. Such a choice is largely academic, however, because neither the President nor Congress can fully determine U.S. commitments. Moreover, reducing commitments is easier said than done. Talk of the United States adopting an “offshore balancing” strategy sounds fine, but is both risky and impractical. Should the government fail to protect U.S. territory (including that in the Western Pacific) against attack, it would be failing in one of its basic responsibilities to the American people. It is desirable to work with allies and friends in the region to increase their defense contributions, and the United States would lose more than it would gain by abrogating any number of treaties that commit the United States to the defense of allies across the globe. A failure on the part of the United States to continue to command the commons would similarly incur great economic, political, and military costs.

As a result, defense cuts are most likely to force the United States to accept greater risk. In concrete terms, this means a reduced readiness to wage war and, should the United States go to war, in conflicts that will go on longer and cost more American lives than would have been the case if we were better prepared.

Reducing readiness and increasing risk applies to times of peace as well as war. It also amounts to a decreased ability to reassure allies and deter competitors. Cutting back on engagement with U.S. allies and friends threatens to undermine their confidence in the United States, and reducing U.S. military presence in key regions could tempt adversaries into thinking they can take on the United States.

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