

Dispel Distrust: Start from North Korea

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Abstract

The United States and China lack political trust despite repeated reassurances from each side. A case in point is the U.S. pivot to Asia, which many in China consider a U.S. strategy to counter China's growing power. On the other hand, no matter how often the Chinese government repeats its "peaceful rise" mantra, many in the United States cite China's aggressive treatment of territorial disputes for their belief that its rise will destabilize the region.

How to bridge such perceptual and policy gaps? Actions speak louder than words. The two countries can start to dispel their political distrust by working jointly now to find a solution to the North Korea nuclear dilemma. The United States and China share the objective of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, but have different concerns about and visions of the Peninsula. They can begin by reaching an agreement about a future East Asian security landscape that does not harm their vital interests. With assistance from other relevant players, the United States and China can bring the North Korea issue to a satisfactory conclusion, building political trust in the process and laying the foundation for further cooperation in the future.

Deep Distrust, High Willingness to Cooperate

Historically, rising powers and reigning powers have feared challenges and threats from each other. As China gains economic and military power, some have noted that the United States and China seem to be becoming increasingly mutually distrustful despite public statements to the contrary, which has undermined the success of cooperative initiatives between the two. China and the United States have repeatedly reassured each other of their benign intentions as a way to avert the conflict often associated with a global power transition; the United States has publicly welcomed China's peaceful rise, and China has indicated that it does not intend to replace the United States or expel it from the Asia-Pacific region. Scholars such as David M. Lampton have characterized the U.S.-Chinese relationship as one of competition and cooperation.¹ It is in both countries' interests to manage their differences and expand areas of cooperation if they wish to avoid conflicts. The two sides' major current efforts to accomplish this can be summarized as America's "pivot" to Asia and China's "new type of great power relations" framework. Through these initiatives, both the United States and China hope to promote cooperation so as to avoid the historical tragedy of Thucydides' trap. Unfortunately, so far each side has poorly interpreted the other's policy initiative, which highlights the existence of deep-rooted distrust between the two countries.

While U.S. allies and most countries in Asia support the United States' "rebalance" or "pivot" to Asia in the context of China's rapid resurgence, China remains suspicious of U.S. intentions. The key components of this pivot include strengthening U.S. ties with Asian allies, deepening the United States' working relationships with emerging powers, engaging with regional multilateral institutions, expanding trade and investment, forging a broad-based military presence, and advancing democracy and human rights. Though Obama administration officials have reiterated that the United States does not and will not contain China, many believe that the pivot strategy was at least partially designed to counter China's growing power.² Chinese leaders feel deeply uncomfortable that the United States has strengthened ties with most of China's neighbors, especially those that have territorial disputes with China; that the United

DISPEL DISTRUST: START FROM NORTH KOREA

States has begun shifting more naval and air forces to Asia even though it already has forward troops in Japan and South Korea; and that the United States has claimed that the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty covers the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands without maintaining a position regarding sovereignty over the islands. Chinese leaders also fear that these U.S. policies are emboldening and encouraging the adventurist behaviors of some politicians in Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam as evidenced by these politicians' confrontational approaches towards China. The Chinese leadership wonders what Washington has done to improve U.S.-China relations while consolidating the United States' presence in the Asia-Pacific region. These concerns may not sound interesting or sensible in Washington, but they are real and serious for many Chinese analysts and policymakers. The bottom line is the distrust between the United States and China has not declined as a result of the pivot.

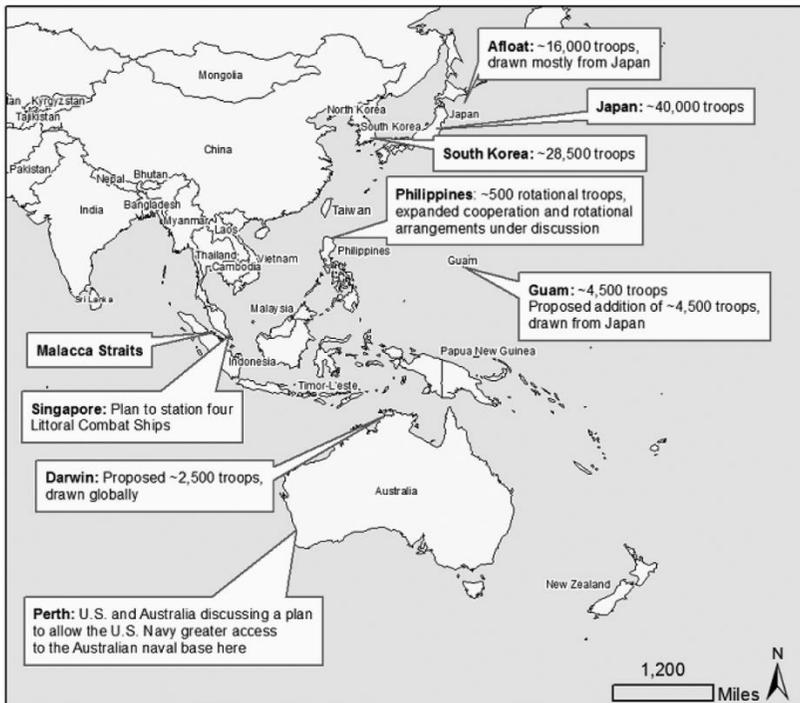


Figure 1: Map of the Asia-Pacific, Including Selected 2012 U.S. Troop Deployments and Plans.³

It does not help that the White House's signals have not been consistent. For example, officials from both governments considered President Barack Obama's November 2014 visit to China during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit to be a success, because the two sides signed a wide array of agreements on topics ranging from climate change and trade to energy cooperation and citizen exchanges. From China's perspective, the United States and China reached these agreements on an equal footing, which suggested that the United States was willing to work with and treat China as a partner. Yet the United States has since made statements that suggest the contrary. In his 2015 State of the Union address, for example, President Obama publicly depicted China as a rival and framed U.S.-China relations as pure competition.⁴ According to this framing of the relationship, the United States would attempt to ensure that China obeys U.S.-made rules, does not make new regional trade rules, and stops proposing new international regimes or challenging the existing international order. In a later, written message, President Obama recapped his view that the United States, not China, should write rules for commerce in Asia.⁵

Meanwhile, the United States remains suspicious of and has not yet fully embraced China's "new type of great power relations" proposal. Then-Vice President Xi Jinping first sketched out this concept in his February 15, 2012 speech in Washington, D.C. Xi said that such a relationship would be characterized by "mutual understanding and strategic trust," "respecting each other's 'core interests,'" "mutually beneficial cooperation," and "enhancing cooperation and coordination in international affairs and on global issues."⁶ Xi officially proposed the concept again during a summit with President Obama at Sunnylands, California in June 2013. However, China's behaviors in international territorial disputes and its crackdown on domestic dissent in recent years have not been encouraging. The United States would have particular difficulty endorsing China's "core interests" if Beijing defines these interests to include maintaining its political system and the communist party's rule and defending China's sovereignty in Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and ostensibly in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

The United States also seems to distrust and has blocked China's attempts to become a more responsible stakeholder in international organizations. Disagreement exists, for example, over China's intentions regarding the international financial system. U.S. officials consider China's leadership role in setting up new multilateral institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS Bank (the bank formed by leading emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), to be a direct challenge to the U.S.-dominated international financial system. Though the United States has reservations about China's new initiatives, others, including major U.S. allies such as the UK, South Korea, Australia, France and Germany, are optimistic that these new institutions can complement existing ones and assist much of the developing world. According to some scholars, China's policy does not seek to demolish or exit from current international organizations and multilateral regimes; instead, China is constructing channels for shaping the international order beyond Western claims to leadership.⁷

The United States seems to have difficulty facing the changing global power structure and moving past its distrust of China; as Wu Xinbo of Fudan University commented, the United States is not treating China's rise properly, but is instead wooing its Asian allies to counter China and obstructing further economic cooperation in East Asia.⁸ Obama called China a "free rider," but when China has attempted to play a larger role in international affairs, the United States has been reluctant to support China's efforts.⁹ For example, when China proposed to set up the new AIIB, the United States did not endorse the idea at first and pressured its allies not to join the bank. As suggested by some scholars, Western countries should consider cautious involvement and participation in selected China-launched mechanisms.¹⁰ Indeed, key members of the existing financial institutions could more easily exercise leverage over these new institutions if they participate; participation is more likely to lead to better governance, transparency, and sustainability for these new institutions. While China's mercantilist approach and its low labor and environmental standards should not become part of the norms of global commerce, the United States fails to realize that China is now the world's second-largest economy and has global interests. Regardless of whether

China is a trustworthy partner, the United States can no longer single-handedly dictate international political economy.

The way China goes about pursuing a greater role in international affairs can also either exacerbate or alleviate the United States' distrust of China. Inside China, some scholars have argued that the government should abandon Deng Xiaoping's dictum of keeping a low profile in foreign affairs.¹¹ Their rationale is that China is powerful enough now to demand a greater degree of symmetry in its relations with the United States. Military and nationalist scholars are especially strong in making these calls.¹² Rising nationalism at home drives China's high-handed behaviors externally, and China tends to blame others for creating tensions in bilateral relations without sufficiently reflecting upon its own conduct. As an emerging global power, China has not always acted humbly and responsibly.

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Chinese foreign policy since 2010 has become a hotly-debated topic. Recently, a surge of scholarly publications has focused on analyzing why and how China's foreign policy became more assertive after 2010, even though there is no consensus on such assertiveness.¹³ In 2014, as the world marked the centennial anniversary of World War I, many analysts penned articles and commentaries asserting that contemporary China resembled pre-WWI Germany. The implication of these articles was that the rise of China would destabilize and even lead to war in Asia. Indeed, according to the Organskian power transition theory, tensions between a rising power and the dominant power almost always ended in war.¹⁴ Defensive realists such as John Mearsheimer also believe that China's rise will automatically challenge the United States, and that conflict is inevitable.¹⁵

Mainstream scholars and policymakers on both sides reject the premise that the United States and China are somehow destined for conflict. As Tom Donilon, then Obama's national security adviser, commented in

March 2013, there is nothing preordained about such an outcome.¹⁶ Top American scholars such as Ken Lieberthal and David M. Lampton caution that the United States should continue to engage and cooperate with China and should not force Asian countries to choose between the two powers.¹⁷ Many Chinese scholars share this view. According to Jia Qingguo of Peking University, the foundation for cooperation between the United States and China remains solid.¹⁸ Politically, both countries' elites are willing to cooperate and wish to avoid confrontation. Economically, the two countries have become inescapably interwoven, with bilateral trade topping \$500 billion a year. Jia has pointed out that peaceful power transitions have taken place; the rise of the United States in the 19th century did not lead to war with Great Britain, and the United States welcomed and assisted the reemergence of Germany and Japan after WWII. China's peaceful rise is entirely possible, Jia claims, because China defends the current international order and advocates an open international trade system. Even in disputed territories, China prefers to solve or manage the problems through negotiation, and after decades of growth and opening up, the differences between the United States and China over key values such as the market economy, the rule of law, human rights, and democracy are narrowing.¹⁹ Other leading Chinese scholars such as Qin Yaqing and Jin Canrong also suggest that China will continue to adopt a low-profile foreign policy and seek cooperation with the United States.²⁰

No matter one's school of thought, it is clear that current U.S. policy towards China does not fully acknowledge and accept the emerging new world order. How the United States responds to China's policy initiatives going forward will greatly affect what China will do next. The Obama administration has failed to recognize China's constructive approach and has been reluctant to fully endorse the "new type of great power relations" framework. As Cheng Li and Lucy Xu correctly point out, the United States' suspicions of Chinese intentions are the key barrier to U.S. endorsement of the framework.²¹ Moreover, accepting it would suggest that the United States recognizes itself as a declining established power caught in Thucydides' trap with a rising China, or possibly that the United States supports China's core interests, such as China's claims in the

disputed territories in the South and East China Seas. Finally, U.S. allies in Asia, especially Japan, would feel slighted by such an exclusive G-2 type of power arrangement in the region.

The North Korea Conundrum

Despite the willingness of China and the United States to cooperate and avoid confrontation, the two countries still lack political trust. They can start with their shared objective of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. North Korea presents a security challenge for both the United States and China, which is the very reason the two powers share a common interest in the issue and can help alleviate each other's concerns about the future. Compared with other controversial issues such as Taiwan, historical and territorial disputes in East Asia, and piracy, over which the two countries are sharply separated, the United States and China share a goal of denuclearizing North Korea, and Beijing and Washington have a history of cooperating on the issue. In addition, with North Korea's tests of nuclear devices and improved nuclear and missile technology over the past few years, the issue is increasingly urgent. A mutually acceptable solution to the North Korea issue could not only avoid the potentially calamitous consequences of a nuclear-armed North Korea triggering military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, but also provide a litmus test for whether the United States and China can work together more broadly to build trust between them and to promote security in East Asia.

Many blame Pyongyang for developing nuclear weapons and posing a dire security challenge in East Asia; few admit that North Korea did not create the problem alone. The unfinished Korean War was a proxy war between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, and it has defined the East Asian security landscape for decades. During the Cold War, North Korea was skillful at playing China and the Soviet Union against each other and succeeded in squeezing aid from both powers. After the Soviet Union's disintegration, China became North Korea's only reliable provider of food and aid, while the United States and Japan refused to recognize North Korea diplomatically. Feeling insecure and isolated, North Korea aims to build a *kangsong taeguk* (strong and prosperous state) with a powerful

military and advanced economy, and after three successful nuclear tests in 2006, 2009 and 2013 it has declared itself a nuclear state, a status the international community has not formally recognized. Relations between China and North Korea have markedly deteriorated since Kim Jong-un came to power in 2011, and North Korea's behaviors have hurt China's interest in maintaining a peaceful regional environment.

The 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea represented a rare opportunity to terminate North Korea's nuclear program. Unfortunately, neither side held to its end of the bargain. The Six-Party Talks that started in 2003 have been stalemated since 2009; though China and the United States are interested in resuming the talks, they have been unable to work jointly and persuade North Korea to return to the negotiation table. With security, economic, and other challenges to deal with elsewhere, neither China nor the United States has treated North Korea as a priority issue since the Six-Party Talks broke down. In short, the current challenge posed by North Korea is the outcome of a series of events involving many actors, and the solution to the problem is not possible without cooperation from both major powers.

The United States and China firmly oppose Pyongyang's nuclearization, yet both seem unmotivated to take immediate and new action and instead have continued the same approaches they have used in the past. The North Korean nuclear issue has demanded enormous diplomatic resources from the United States and China; it is a major diplomatic and security headache in both capitals. China has grown increasingly tired of Pyongyang's recalcitrant behaviors, yet it continues to provide aid to Pyongyang, which implies that North Korea remains strategically valuable and serves China's security interest as a buffer state.²² Meanwhile, the United States keeps a wary eye on North Korea by maintaining a formidable level of force in the region and routinely holding joint military exercises with South Korea and Japan. It considers North Korea a direct threat to its national interests and those of its allies. As a result of the two powers' lack of coordination and joint action, North Korea has refined its nuclear technology, and gross human rights violations persist. To permit the current situation in North Korea to continue is both dangerous and

unethical. It is also puzzling that the United States and China have not started to work together again on the North Korea issue when international talks, of which both the United States and China are part, are making significant progress on the issue of Iran's nuclear program.²³

There are a number of reasons the United States and China have failed so far to take joint action on North Korea, of which geostrategic uncertainty is the most significant. Korea scholar Stephan Haggard notes that President Obama was disgusted by the missile and nuclear tests in 2009, by the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the Yeonpyeong shelling, and also by the breakdown of the so-called Leap Day deal between North Korea and the United States in 2012.²⁴ In addition, Haggard suggests, the Sony hack has played a much more significant role in U.S.-North Korean relations than most people realize.²⁵ With a Republican Congress in place, initiatives from Washington are unlikely unless North Korea makes a bold move, presumably such as a unilateral moratorium on nuclear or missile tests.²⁶ However, to wait for the Kim Jong-un regime to take the conciliatory step first, or better yet, for its collapse, is not realistic. Meanwhile, some analysts and U.S. officials suggest that China is not putting sufficient pressure on North Korea.²⁷ China, indeed, is unwilling to abandon North Korea and consequently face a collapsed North Korea, which would potentially have tremendous political, economic, security and humanitarian costs to China. China's leverage over North Korea may also be overblown, as North Korea does not seem to care about China's interests.

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Western media routinely portray China as North Korea's "only ally," which continues to provide food and aid and forms the lifeline of the North Korean regime. A closer look at China's evolving policies towards the two Koreas since the early 1990s reveals that China is shifting away from its traditional pro-North Korea position to a more South Korea-friendly policy. Warming economic, political, and strategic relations

between China and South Korea are clear indications that Beijing has become dissatisfied with the regime in Pyongyang and is prepared to change its North Korea policy under the right conditions. Such conditions include, among others, no sudden collapse of the North Korean regime, a politically neutral unified Korea in the future, and the significant reduction, if not total withdrawal, of U.S. troops from a unified Korea. Only the United States can help meet those conditions. U.S. sanctions against North Korea have not achieved their intended outcomes, while China's continued support for North Korea has prolonged the defiant regime's life. It is high time that the United States and China changed their approaches and brought the North Korean nuclear issue to a soft landing.

Moving Forward

The clichéd interpretation of the Chinese word for “crisis” is that it is composed of two characters (危机) that mean, respectively, “danger” and “opportunity.” So far, North Korea has been treated as a dangerous

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problem, not a hidden opportunity for the United States and China to create lasting peace and stability in East Asia through cooperation. The two nations once played a leadership role in the Six-Party Talks. Now, they should behave responsibly by picking

up where they left off and actively seeking a solution to the problem.

The underlying cause of this poor coordination on the North Korea issue is strategic distrust between the United States and China and their inability to move beyond the old mentality. While the two countries share the objective of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, they differ on their views of North Korea today and in the future; the United States considers North Korea a direct national security threat, but some in China continue to view North Korea as a buffer state for China. Without a common endgame in

sight, neither the United States nor China knows what to expect from Korean unification or is prepared to deal with a collapsed North Korea.

The United States and China, together with South Korea, need to map out a blueprint for Korea's future first. If both Koreas opt to reunify, the only viable solution is a reunified Korea under the leadership of the South, but for both the United States and China, the foreign policy of the future reunified Korea remains a key uncertainty. Stability in the East Asian political, economic, and security landscape must be a priority to all involved parties. Therefore, a reunified Korea should maintain political neutrality and should establish good relations with both China and the United States, balancing their vital interests. In return, the United States and China must also prepare to cede the decision of whether U.S. troops can remain on unified Korean soil to Seoul; Washington should assure Beijing that any possible future U.S. force posture on the peninsula would be smaller than the current one and not based any further north than it is now.²⁸ Establishing these intentions as part of a blueprint for Korea's future is critical to the two powers' success in working together to dispel distrust and promote Korea's peaceful reunification.

Once the United States and China have a common understanding of the situation, they can use both carrots and sticks to entice North Korea back to the denuclearization talks. Current U.S. strategies heavily rely on sanctions without offering anything promising or attractive to North Korea if it relinquishes its nuclear program. On the other hand, China hesitates to take a tougher approach to North Korea for fear of regional instability and massive refugee flows into China as a result of a sudden regime collapse in Pyongyang. These policies have so far failed to stall or turn back North Korea's nuclear program; it is time for a change.

The United States must offer clear and inviting incentives in return for North Korea's reciprocal measures; these carrots should include concrete steps toward ending hostility, recognition of the North Korean regime, and eventually normal diplomatic ties. Recognizing a repulsive regime does not necessarily mean endorsing it; the United States has recognized and still recognizes governments that violate international laws and abuse

human rights. In fact, it is politically wise for a country to keep its enemies close, if doing so serves its national interests. Meanwhile, China's recent shift from a party-to-party relationship to a normal state-to-state relationship vis-à-vis North Korea provides an opportunity to introduce sticks, thereby unambiguously dispelling the myth that China and North Korea remain allies. China should firmly oppose any North Korean policies and actions that would harm China's national interests or regional security, reducing or cutting off aid and food to North Korea if necessary.

Next, the United States and China must work with their respective allies and friends – especially Japan, South Korea, and Russia – to coordinate their policies so that North Korea cannot take advantage of inconsistencies among these countries' policies. To ensure such a collectively successful

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North Korea policy, all parties involved must reset their interests and focus on tackling North Korea's nuclear issue first. For example, if the Six-Party Talks resume, Japan should refrain from adding its abducted citizens in North Korea to the agenda, which would complicate denuclearization negotiations. Similarly, Russia should not take advantage of the cracks in the Sino-

North Korean relationship and whet North Korea's appetite with additional aid. Russia's coordination with other powers over the North Korea policy would improve its international image and lessen the distressing consequences of its Ukraine policy – but these objectives should be secondary to the goal of denuclearizing North Korea.

The United States and China should also share other miscellaneous responsibilities associated with the North Korea issue. Both the United States and China should contribute to South Korea's unification fund to help defray the high costs of North-South reconciliation and future reunification. The United States and Japan must also be willing to share the burden of hosting large numbers of North Korean refugees with China

and South Korea. Meanwhile, the United States and China should both take steps to welcome North Korea as an active member of the international community and help it expand economic and cultural exchanges with other nations so as to break North Korea's isolation. North Korea will soon realize that its *byungjin* (parallel development) national plan of both economic modernization and nuclear development is not realistic; the United States and China should promptly and properly support North Korea's economic and political reforms. Finally, both the United States and China should offer security guarantees for a North Korea that gradually opens up. A confident North Korea that feels welcomed and integrated into the international system will be more likely to pursue peaceful reunification and denuclearization.

Conclusion

Avoiding the sort of clash between an existing great power and an emerging power foretold by Thucydides' trap has become the most serious challenge of the U.S.-Chinese relationship. For the United States, the task should be not to prevent China's rise, but rather to ensure that the United States and its allies evolve with China in a way that maximizes peace and welfare for all. For China, the objective should not be to challenge the current international system or to replace the United States as the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific, but rather to work with the United States and others as a responsible power to extend peace and stability in Asia and beyond. Neither the United States' "pivot" nor China's "new type of great power relations" can succeed if the United States and China do not enhance their mutual trust. The United States appears to be facing a dilemma in its Asia policy: either work more closely with a rising China that does not always see eye-to-eye with the United States, or expand its alliances and friendships with other regional countries. The United States has yet to figure out how to achieve both objectives. China, on the other hand, is sometimes unsure about how to use the new-found power associated with its rapid growth, and needs the opportunity to accustom itself to its new role in international affairs. Both the United States and China should adjust to the changing power structure and emerging new world order.

Differences between the United States and China in terms of culture, history, social system, and level of development have contributed to their mutual distrust, as have conservative and hawkish politicians, media, scholars and military personnel, who are likely to continue to drum up nationalism and create obstacles for future cooperation. These deep-rooted suspicions will not disappear soon, and no one should assume that building trust will be easy. Political leaders must have the wisdom and foresight to ensure the negative forces contributing to U.S.-Chinese distrust will not hinder the two countries' cooperation. Luckily, both sides are determined to avoid Thucydides' trap and are willing to handle their complex relationship peacefully. Cooperating on North Korea will create a substantial opportunity for the two countries to lessen strategic distrust and help create conditions for a lasting peace in Asia that serves both countries' interests as well as those of others in the region and beyond.

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³ Congressional Research Service, *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" Toward Asia*, by Mark E. Manyin, et al., R42448, CRS, 2012, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf> (accessed April 24, 2015)

⁴ Here are some quotes from President Obama's 2015 State of the Union Address: "China wants to write the rules for the world's fastest-growing region. That would put our workers and businesses at a disadvantage. Why would we let that happen? We should write those rules. We should level the playing field." "In the Asia Pacific, we are modernizing alliances while making sure that other nations play by the rules." "No foreign nation, no hacker, should be able to shut down our networks, steal our trade secrets, or invade the privacy of American families, especially our kids." "More than half of manufacturing executives have said they're actively looking at bringing jobs back from China. Let's give them one more reason to get it done." Both explicitly and implicitly, China is viewed as a competitor and challenger.

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²³ A framework was reached between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany in early April 2015, under which Iran would give up two-thirds of its centrifuges used to enrich uranium and would reduce its stockpile of low-enriched uranium from 10,000 kilograms to 300 kilograms. This is a "significant progress" according to the US Department of State, see <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/04/240170.htm>

²⁴ On February 29, 2012, the United States and North Korea announced a "leap day" agreement that the United States would provide substantial food aid in return for the North agreeing to a moratorium on uranium enrichment and missile testing and a return of IAEA inspectors to Yongbyon, leading to a resumption of the six-party talks. Soon afterwards, North Korea launched a satellite to commemorate the late Kim il-sung's 100th birthday, and the United States subsequently suspended aid to North Korea.

²⁵ Song Sang-ho, interview by Stephan Haggard, "Seoul Needs to Take Initiative on N.K. Issues," *The Korea Herald*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150202000831>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Scott Stearns, "China Can Do More on North Korea, Kerry Says," *Voice of America*, February 13, 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/kerry-military-drills-should-not-be-linked-to-korean-family-reunions/1850610.html>

²⁸ James B. Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, "Keep Hope Alive: How to Prevent U.S.-Chinese Relations From Blowing Up," *Foreign Affairs*, 93 no. 4 (July August 2014), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141476/james-b-steinberg-and-michael-ohanlon/keep-hope-alive>