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Panel: Reordering East Asia

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Talking Points for: Charles Morrison, East-West Center

Despite many contemporary points of tension, the international order in East Asia, both compared to its past and compared to some other regions, is relatively stable. The United States has played a very critical role in helping to create and maintain this order and ensuring that it remains critical to its evolution for the foreseeable future.

A stable international order does not imply the absence of change or even necessarily of conflict. It suggests that change occurs in an orderly manner and that international conflicts are resolved without violence. Ideally, as has occurred in North America or Western Europe, it becomes virtually impossible for citizens of the states in the system to imagine their countries in physical conflict. But this level of international order, a true security community, remains a vision for the future in East Asia.

Important elements of a stable order have been established in East Asia. These include:

1) A relatively strong state system, with some exception for the weaker parts of divided nations. While some states face separatist threats, few face existential threats. For the most part, the states of East Asia maintain internal order and are capable of making and keeping international commitments.

2) A relatively high and growing degree of economic integration, by some measures greater than that of North America, and of human interchange.

3) An increasingly dense set of regional and international institutions that socialize leaders into the system and encourage governments to work cooperatively on issues of common concern.

4) An equilibrating dynamic that tends to align against behavior perceived to be threatening to the prevailing order, and;

5) An increasing integration of East Asian nations into international institutions and norms.

The threats to the system come from:

1) The potential for increased great power competition.

2) Internal nationalism powered by dissatisfaction and augmented by social media.

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- 3) The potential for irrational or self-destructive behavior.
 - 4) Maritime territorial disputes, cross-border issues, or other events that could be a catalyst for arms build-ups or wider conflict.
 - 5) Some combination of the above rather than any one in isolation.

These sources of threats cannot be discounted.

The United States has long been an actor within the East Asian system. The U.S. stake in the region has been rising, and U.S. society and business have been rebalancing toward Asia for decades. The rebalance as a policy thus reflects what has been going on anyway rather than leads, and will continue, whether or not it is labeled. In its own interests, the United States will be an engaged actor in East Asia.

The US-centric alliance system is a status quo oriented plank of the East Asian security architecture. It would be destabilizing either to withdraw it or to dramatically augment it in some fashion. The rebalancing elements that exist are incremental and non-destabilizing.

“The rise of Asia” is a continuing trend that is powered by underlying and long-term dynamics. The challenge for the United States is to work constructively with East Asian countries and in consonance with this trend, not just to strengthen the regional order, but also the global one.

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