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Panel: G2 or G1? U.S.-China Relations

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Talking Points for: Evans Revere, Albright Stonebridge Group

Changing power relationships in Asia, particularly the dramatic rise of China, are generating uncertainty due to concerns about the future of U.S.-China relations. If America’s “unipolar moment” in the region ever existed, it has now vanished, replaced by growing competition for power and influence between the United States and the PRC.

Also a thing of the past is the notion of a U.S.-China “G-2” arrangement, in which the two powers would forge a special relationship to shape the development of regional and world affairs together. Instead, the future of the region and the globe seems more likely to be shaped by whether or not Washington and Beijing will find a way to manage their emerging strategic rivalry, avoid conflict, and maximize areas of cooperation.

While the United States still occupies the dominant place in the world’s economy, China is on track to become the world’s largest economy in aggregate terms. It is already the leading trading partner of most of the countries in its periphery. Additionally, its influence is likely to expand thanks to its ability to bankroll new institutions, such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. China’s economic success means it can make substantial investments in military modernization and expansion, particularly of its naval forces. That has allowed China to pursue a more activist advocacy of its interests, including a more assertive approach to dealing with the territorial disputes it has with several of its neighbors.

China’s growing power has been accompanied by a growing suspicion of the United States, which the Chinese leadership sees as determined to contain and isolate the PRC, undermine its political system, and prevent China from playing its rightful role in the region and the world. Meanwhile, many in America see China’s rising military capabilities as a potential threat to the United States and its interests. Many worry that China seeks to drive wedges between the United States and its allies, push the United States out of the region, and replace it as the area’s dominant power. Moreover, China’s determination to enforce its claims in the South China Sea has prompted fears that this could imperil freedom of navigation—a core U.S. strategic interest.

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TALKING POINTS

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Many in the United States are viewing with concern internal developments in the PRC, including the ongoing crackdown on human rights, democracy activists, and NGOs, efforts to limit access to information on the Internet, and a tightening of ideological controls. These developments are seen as evidence that China under the leadership of Xi Jinping is moving in a problematic direction. Concerns about the lack of transparency in China’s strategic intentions have been exacerbated by the fact that the two countries seem to have little in common when it comes to their respective core values.

These developments and more suggest that U.S-China relations are trending in a worrisome direction. Nevertheless, conflict is hardly inevitable, and both countries seem keen to manage their differences, reduce friction, and enhance transparency. But an era of Sino-U.S. competition and rivalry, even if well managed, seems likely to contribute to regional uncertainty for years to come.

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