**Items for Discussion**

“US-China Policy for the Next Administration”

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The next president should:

*Recommit to the Pivot as the nation’s top strategic priority - and then sustain this priority*

Within six months of taking office the next president should issue a National Security Strategy (NSS) that designates the Indo-Asia-Pacific (IAP) as the nation’s top priority – citing both geostrategic and geoeconomic rationales.

Prior to the inauguration, the president should designate a small team of advisers to formulate this NSS, and then give this team the responsibility (and the necessary support) to constantly remind members of the administration of this strategic priority. The team could be located in the National Security Council, in the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department, or in the Office of the Vice President. One model for this small team is the Committee of Imperial Defence, which served as the “conscience and remembrancer” for successive British governments from 1904 to 1939.

*Recognize that Priority is not Exclusivity*

In its effort to explain and initiate the Pivot, the Obama administration encouraged many governments in Europe and the Middle East to believe that the US had abandoned responsibilities in these regions. The next president will need to reassure these governments without losing its focus on the IAP. If managed properly, Europe can serve as a resource for the US in its pivot campaign. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the Middle East. The next administration will also need to develop the capacity for coping with what Bismarck called “imponderabilia” without losing sight of the long-term goals.

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Replace Mil-Pol with Pol-Mil

The Pivot can only succeed if all of the elements of US power are utilized. To date, there has been an over-reliance on military instruments of power. This is understandable in light of the vast resources of the armed forces and the disproportionate influence of the military within the Washington policy-making community. To the extent possible, however, the next president should seek to bolster the status and influence of the civilian foreign policy institutions, within Washington and in the IAP. The long term goal of this campaign should be to return the State Department to its traditional role as the lead agency in the articulation and management of the national interest.

Resist the Temptation to Fall Prey to “Insular Hostility” and Unilateralism

Despite significant setbacks, the rules-based liberal order is still a powerful source of international cooperation and global prosperity. It is also a special source of influence for the United States in its relations with IAP governments in general, and China in particular. Much of the rhetoric of the current presidential election casts doubt upon the candidates’ commitment to what John Ikenberry calls “the underlying principles of liberal international order, defined as an open and loosely rule-based system.” As a first step in reversing this tendency, and bolstering US influence in the IAP, the next president should revisit the Trans-Pacific Partnership in order to salvage those elements that are consistent with Ikenberry’s liberal order.

The next president should also take advantage of the recent ruling by the Hague Court to “reverse the collision course” between Washington and Beijing over Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. As the Crisis Group recently argued, “Washington’s display of naval power can send a message of deterrence, but it will take painstaking multilateral diplomacy to persuade China to commit to negotiations with ...ASEAN for a rules-based solution.”

Learn from the Thucydides Trap

Graham Allison has argued that in 12 of 16 cases of great power transition since 1500 the result has been war. In many of those instances the war was either unwanted or unforeseen by both parties. If we accept Allison’s numbers, then the so-called Thucydides Trap is the most reliable predictive theory in the field of international relations. The next president must take very seriously this cautionary lesson as she or he formulates plans for the management of US policies toward China. It is safe to say that in many, if not most, of the 12 cases that led to war the competing governments pursued hedging strategies which they viewed as reasonable and responsible under the circumstances. The next president should begin by making it clear to his/her administration that hedging will not be the default solution in the case of US-China relations. Washington will need to seek more proactive and productive forms of engagement with China.
This is not appeasement. Indeed, the US will need to continue its ongoing efforts to convert a hub-and-spokes alliance network into a web of mutually reinforcing defense agreements. But this can and should be done in ways that are not gratuitously provocative toward Beijing. It also can and should be done while Washington works with IAP governments (including China) to strengthen what Kurt Campbell calls “Asia’s operating system”.