To reduce the possibility of conflicts in the Indo-Pacific basin, the United States should encourage the development of new "Shanghai" processes for both the maritime regions of the East and South China Seas as well as for Southeast and South Asia. Like the Shanghai process of the 1990s--which resolved the outstanding territorial and border claims between China, Russia and the republics of Central Asia--these new processes would focus on finding compromises and acceptable swaps of territories and claims to produce final, mutually-acceptable delineations. As part of a new diplomatic initiative, creative proposals to jointly share resources and/or to demilitarize contested areas can help to reduce the likelihood of even an accidental conflict flaring into a regional crisis, in which it would prove far more difficult to prevent a U.S.-China clash. It is important for all parties not to pursue maximalist claims, for Beijing not to use its economic and military predominance in the region to pressure others for concessions, or for the U.S. to uncritically back the claims of its allies. As an interested third party, the United States needs to find the balance between honoring its alliance commitments--and to, whenever possible, serve as an honest broker--but not allowing its allies and partners in the region to believe that they enjoy a blank check vis-a-vis their disputes with China.

Nikolas K. Gvosdev

Contributing Editor, The National Interest

Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute