

## Chapter Thirteen

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### **China in the Asia-Pacific in 2040: Alternative Futures**

#### **Executive Summary**

- China and the Asia-Pacific region stand at a crossroads. Asian geopolitics, in particular, will be dominated by the interaction among the United States, China, India, Japan, and Russia. Strategic concerns loom large as China's growing power and reach run up against the interests of other powers.
- China's meteoric rise has given impetus to new geopolitical alignments. Power asymmetry among major stakeholders means that each will form flexible, ad hoc partnerships with the others where their interests converge, mobilize the support of one against the other when their interests collide, and checkmate the other two from forming an alignment against it as they compete, coalesce, and collude with each other when their objectives coincide.
- Peace and stability will prevail if China and other powers work for a multipolar Asia with inclusive multilateral institutions. However, competition, rivalry, and even conflict will result should bipolarity reemerge or should Beijing seek to reestablish a hierarchical Sino-centric regional order wherein the Middle Kingdom behaves in a traditional manner, expecting tributary relations with its neighbors.

#### **Introduction**

Power in the international system is always relative and ever-shifting. States rise and fall primarily due to their uneven rates of economic growth, wars, and imperial overstretch. Some states grow more rapidly than others, thanks to domestic policies and

institutions, technological breakthroughs, and political leadership's ability to mobilize national resources that places them at an advantage over others. Over the past three decades, China has demonstrated tremendous ability to plan and mobilize national resources to implement goal-oriented, timely action strategies in economic, diplomatic, and military arenas. More than a quarter of a century of exponential economic growth in China has been accompanied by nearly two decades of double-digit growth in its military expenditure, which, in turn, has given impetus to new political alignments.

China's pursuit of "comprehensive national power" is aimed at ensuring that no other country has the wherewithal to undermine what Beijing claims to be its "core national interests." This power-maximization drive has widened the gap between China and its neighbors, especially Russia, Japan, and India. The 2008 financial crisis has served to accelerate global economic rebalancing. Only political disintegration or prolonged economic stagnation or war would be Beijing's undoing. The moment a country arrives on the international stage as "a great power of its age," it generates cooperation, competition, envy, and rivalry. How to adapt to China's growing power and influence is a question that dominates the foreign-policy establishment of nearly every country in the world. Will China use its growing power to establish a rule- and norm-based order that strengthens inclusive, multilateral institutions? Or, will China use its power in pursuit of narrow national interests in ways associated with hegemonic intentions, as ascendant powers have done in the past? Is the difference between a cute and cuddly panda and a fire-breathing dragon one of attitude, or with whom it is dealing? This chapter assesses the impact of China's rise and lays out four alternative strategic futures for China and the Asia-Pacific region to the year 2040.

## The Reigning Power versus the Rising Power

Old established powers are usually reluctant to cede the prestige and status they have enjoyed over the years. However, rising powers are loath to accept externally imposed limits to their power, driven as they are to expand their access to new territories, natural resources, and markets or by the lure of intangible gains in prestige, leadership, and security. The United States is the established, reigning power, while China is the rising power. China's global outreach for trade, investment, markets, natural resources, and bases has extended its influence and interests to every nook and corner of the world. Even as Chinese leaders make statements about the peaceful and defensive nature of military activities, they demand that others accept Beijing's absolutist (but ambiguous) positions on a variety of highly contentious territorial, maritime, and resource disputes. All the while, Beijing signals, with increasing assertiveness, that the region must move away from a US-centered, bilateral, alliance-based security structure. Left unsaid is that a post-American security order will resemble a Sino-centric hierarchical structure wherein China's preponderant power will determine the nature of bilateral relations and set the agenda of multilateral institutions. China has acquired the power to force others to get out of its backyard even as Beijing seeks to establish and expand the Chinese footprint in others' backyards. China-watchers discern a major policy shift underway in Beijing, and attribute increased global assertiveness to a new, evolving Chinese strategy, which is transitioning from the late Chinese patriarch Deng Xiaoping's directive of "hiding real capabilities to bide our time" (*taoguang yanghui*) to "making contributions by seizing opportunities" (*yousuo zuowei*), taking the lead and showing off China's capabilities to shape others' choices in Beijing's favor.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Xinhua, "Qinghua Scholar: China Should Form Alliances with Other Countries," *Chinascopes* (December 10, 2011), available at: <<http://chinascopes.org/main/content/view/4125/103/>>.

## Managing China's Rise

Among regional countries, China arouses unease because of its size, history, proximity, potential power, and, more important, because the memories of “the Middle Kingdom syndrome” and tributary state system have not dimmed. Historically, there has never been a time when China has coexisted on equal terms with another power of similar or lesser stature. Beijing’s “non-interference in internal affairs” policy does not mean that China will not demand obeisance from other countries. The growing economic ties between China and its Asian neighbors have created a sense of dependency and despondency. While China’s neighbors do not oppose China’s power and prosperity, they do not welcome their own loss of relative standing and strategic autonomy in foreign policymaking. Neither belligerence nor deference is seen as a prudent policy option with respect to China. Given China’s centrality in Asian geopolitics, “hedging,” or old-fashioned “balancing” vis-à-vis China is becoming the most preferred option, without giving up on the many benefits of engaging Beijing. With the exception of a few (notably Pakistan and North Korea), most Asian countries show little or no desire to live in a China-led or China-dominated Asia. Instead, they seek to preserve existing security alliances and pursue sophisticated diplomatic and hedging strategies designed to give them more freedom of action while avoiding overt alignment with major powers. Consequently, Asian countries now spend more on their militaries than European countries. Being a distant hegemon, the United States still remains the balancing power of choice for many countries on China’s periphery. Therein lies the paradox: despite its relative decline, the United States has become the most sought-after power in the region. All want to benefit from economic ties with China, but none want the region dominated by Beijing or their policy options constrained by China. Put simply, there is no desire to replace the fading American hegemony with Chinese hegemony. Managing China’s rise and molding its behavior will be among the biggest diplomatic challenges facing the region and the world in the coming years.

**Scenario I: Weak Unipolarity: Competitors-cum-Partners**

In this scenario, the United States remains the predominant power. The U.S.-Chinese economies remain inextricably tied in a symbiotic relationship and U.S. growth and prosperity are linked to China's. Though the United States loses its position as the largest economy in the world to China, it succeeds in reinventing itself as an innovative economy and retains a significant technological edge over others. Most Asian countries strengthen their security ties with the United States as part of their hedging, or balancing, strategy, even as they become increasingly dependent on the Chinese market for trade, prosperity, and economic well-being. While maintaining its traditional alliances, Washington enlarges its network of friends and allies by drawing Mongolia, Vietnam, and Indonesia into its orbit. Not wanting to see Asia dominated by a single country, Washington prefers the prospect of a balance of peaceful engagement that includes all the major powers in Asia, China, Japan, and India, with the United States continuing to act as an "engaged offshore power balancer." The premise underlying this strategy of forming a range of partnerships is to shape the strategic environment in ways that would induce China to evolve as a constructive and responsible, rather than a revisionist or an irredentist, power in Asia.

At the same time, the economic and military might of China and Russia, and, to some extent, India, increasingly constrains US policy options. A regional community evolves and the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting plus Eight (ADMM+8) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) emerge as viable security and economic forums and a stable nuclear balance prevails. The nexus between traditional geopolitical and nontraditional or transnational security issues (such as climate change, economic growth, resource scarcity, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and religious radicalism) generates great-power cooperation even as one competes for relative gain and advantage over the others.

Notwithstanding a range of economic and transnational security issues drawing them closer together, old disputes (Taiwan)

and new frictions (currency, trade, the environment, cyberspace, and maritime security), coupled with rival strategic alignments, will keep Beijing and Washington apart. Tensions over Taiwan, Tibet, Pakistan, the South and East China seas and the Korean Peninsula will reverberate in Sino-American relations. Asymmetric growth in the Chinese and US economies will also have the effect of intensifying their power competition. For Beijing, the combination of internal issues of stability, external overlapping spheres of influence, and ever-widening geopolitical horizons forestall the chances for a genuine Sino-American accommodation. Economic and political engagement and military balancing will remain dual components of Beijing's and Washington's policies toward each other. As in the past, they will remain competitors-cum-partners, and the relationship between these two Pacific giants will be characterized by security competition and economic cooperation. From Washington's perspective, this may well be the best-case scenario.

### **Scenario II: A Concert of Powers in a Multipolar Asia**

Lasting peace and stability will be attained provided China, the United States, Japan, India, and Russia join forces in an economic and security concert of powers in the Asia-Pacific region. This scenario envisages economic interdependence and regional integration underpinned by multilateral institutions altering the discourse and course of interstate relations from competition and zero-sum games to cooperation and win-win games. Economic ties provide the basis for a stable relationship that tides over political frictions. Despite tensions in the bilateral relationship, China's economic relationship with the United States is vitally important as a source of investment and technology and as its biggest export market that facilitates its rise as a global power. Likewise, the U.S. economic stakes with China are certainly much higher than that of other powers. On most global economic and security issues, including terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and climate change, and in most multilateral organizations such as the UN Security Coun-

cil and the International Monetary Fund, China more often than not works with the United States rather than against it. Similarly, Japan and China or India and China may be competitors, but their aspirations seem to be manageable. Even if regional heavyweights seem to assert their interests more actively, there is little to suggest that they will pursue reckless policies. Their focus remains on social and political stability and strong economic growth so they can concentrate on realizing their potentials and avoid the perils of stagnation or decline. Just as the United States and the Soviet Union did not go to war to counter each other's power or spheres of influence, Asia's giants need not resort to use of force to neutralize each other's aspirations. The Asia-Pacific region is, in fact, too big for any one country to dominate it without that domination having repercussions at the regional and global levels.

Constructing bilateral relationships based on common security that jettisons the push and shove of balance-of-power politics could be a way out of the security dilemma. Given their focus on sustaining economic growth, all share an interest in avoiding overt rivalry, confrontation, and conflict. Conceivably, as the relative weight of economic factors vis-à-vis security concerns increases, the reality of the rapidly expanding bilateral engagement and participation in various international organizations and multilateral forums would create sufficient trust and provide a different template for addressing their disputes. Greater exposure, a sink-or-swim mentality, and interaction at all levels will definitely help make light of some of history's burdens. While they compete for influence, China and Japan enjoy a mutually beneficial and substantive economic relationship. With India, China shares common interests in maintaining regional stability (for example, combating the Islamist fundamentalist menace), and cooperates on climate change, global trade talks, and in the Group of Twenty. The regional architecture pursuing a rules-based approach to development and dispute resolution, with ASEAN at its core, will underwrite an Asian concert of powers as all the countries need each other to succeed in a globalized

world economy. The nature of economic interdependence, power asymmetry, and transnational security concerns would facilitate a regional order underpinned by multilateral institutions promoting dialogue and cooperation to deal with contentious issues and moderate competitive behavior. Multipolarity and multilateralism will provide incentives for all major powers to pursue a moderate, cooperative foreign policy that promotes stability and growth. From a regional perspective, this would be the best-case scenario.

### **Scenario III: Bipolar Asia: A New Cold War?**

In this scenario, China strives for mastery of Asia as a precursor to rivaling the United States as a global power and bipolarity (the U.S.A. *versus* PRC) reemerges, forcing countries to choose sides. Since the end of the Cold War, the context and tone of the Sino-U.S. relationship has undergone dramatic change. China is now a global power. Tensions over Taiwan, Tibet, trade, currency, environment, and military buildup make bilateral relations turbulent. Indeed, the China challenge to U.S. primacy is far more serious than that of other contenders, because China – unlike the USSR or Japan – is a multidimensional power. China’s long-term objective of becoming the region’s preeminent power notwithstanding, a more realistic short-term goal for the foreseeable future is to establish a partnership with the United States in which American friends and allies are relegated to a subordinate status and the United States and China jointly share preeminence and manage Asian, if not global, affairs. In the Asia-Pacific context, Beijing’s near-term vision of regional order is essentially bipolar (the United States and China), which puts it at odds with Japan’s and India’s views of multipolarity at *both* regional and global levels. With the U.S. share of global economic output declining, many want Washington to cut its losses and cut a deal with Beijing for shared hegemony, instead of shedding U.S. blood and treasure in other people’s wars. However, the prospects of a Sino-American accommodation with the U.S. pulling back strategically from Asia



as China rises to global leadership or a shared Sino-U.S. (G-2) hegemony or duopoly seem remote.

The 2008 global financial crisis has led to skepticism among the Chinese elite about U.S. staying power in the Asia-Pacific over the long term. In an opinion poll in early 2010, more than half of the Chinese people thought that “China and America are heading for a new ‘Cold War.’”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, many Americans seem convinced that China’s rising economic and military power would exacerbate U.S.-Chinese frictions in the years ahead. Aaron Friedberg writes that “deep-seated patterns of power politics are driving the United States and China toward mistrust and competition, if not necessarily toward open conflict.”<sup>3</sup> The risk of miscalculation lies in the rest of the world underestimating China’s power and purpose and China overestimating its strength. Many influential Chinese describe the United States as an old, tired giant crumbling under its own weight while China is seen as a teenager, an adolescent throwing its weight around. Song Xiaojun, a military expert and commentator on China’s CCTV, rules out substantial cooperation in the near future, because “the U.S. is experiencing menopause while China is going through puberty.”<sup>4</sup> Since Washington would neither reduce its footprint in the Asia-Pacific region nor find it easy to share power with China, the consequence – by default, if not design – will be intense strategic competition. The long-ongoing presence of U.S. military forces all around China’s periphery fuels Beijing’s suspicion that the United States seeks to contain China’s rise. Much the same is said of the consequences of reaffirmed, reinvigorated, or emerging security cooperation between the United

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Sheridan, “China’s hawks demand cold war on the US,” *Sunday Times* (London, February 8, 2010), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Friedberg, “Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics,” *The National Interest* (July-August 2011), available at: <<http://nationalinterest.org/article/hegemony-chinese-characteristics-5439?page=show>>.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Richburg, “Mistrust Stalls US-China Space Cooperation,” *Washington Post* (January 21, 2011); “Huanqiu Laughs at the United States’ Unrealistic Ambition to Lead the World,” *Huanqiu.com* (November 15, 2011), available at: <<http://chinascope.org/main/content/view/4067/103/>>.

States and those along China's maritime periphery (including South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, Indonesia, and India). Reacting to Washington's support for the Philippines and Vietnam in their disputes with China over islands and reefs in the South China Sea and an expanded US-Australia alliance, Chinese media commentaries warned that nations siding with the United States in the Asia-Pacific will be punished economically, while calling for Chinese "countermeasures" to the US military buildup in the region. Some strategic analysts talk of China's ability to outspend the US to safeguard its Asia-Pacific interests.<sup>5</sup>

While China as the new global power insists that extra-regional powers – meaning the United States – stay out of the region's disputes, Washington asserts its vital interests in the region via its "pivot to Asia" posture. Should Washington's economic constraints force it to revert to an "offshore balancing" posture, the United States will increasingly rely on its regional allies and partners to carry more of the security burden to prevent China from dominating the regional strategic landscape.<sup>6</sup> Countries in a relative state of decline resist ceding their status to rising challengers. In this context, US ties with Japan, Australia, Vietnam, and India assume greater salience. In particular, Japan and India have taken steps to expand their economic and trade linkages with various Southeast and East Asian countries to a gradual strengthening of security ties. The US slide into the role of an "offshore balancer" would mean that the US-China relations will be characterized by "cooperative competition" at the best of times and "Cold Peace" at the worst of times. In this scenario, unless Japan and India are willing to play a secondary role to China, major-power rivalry is a foregone conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> Editorial, "US Asia-Pacific strategy brings steep price," *Global Times* (November 18, 2011), available at: <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/684596/US-Asia-Pacific-strategy-brings-steep-price.aspx>>.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Cronin, "Power Play: It's time for the U.S. to stand up to China," *Foreign Policy* (January 5, 2012).

For its part, Beijing, extremely sensitive to major power alignments, will recruit friends and allies to counter the perceived containment of China by the United States and its allies. An arms race escalates following an escalation in China's territorial/maritime disputes with India, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan, and over Taiwan's future evolution. Accusing them of following a "Cold War mentality," Beijing takes countermeasures to bolster its defenses, setting in motion an action-reaction cycle. The emergence of an ambitious, nationalist China with an assertive foreign-policy agenda will further power competition with regional competitors. Under these conditions, a new Cold War could emerge between any pair of major powers, but one between the United States and China is as likely as one between India and China. They will employ strategic maneuvers to checkmate each other from gaining an advantage or expanding spheres of influence.<sup>7</sup>

Trade protectionism and currency wars in times of economic slowdown add to stresses and strains. Domestic economic woes may leave Washington with no option but to stand up to China on the economic front, and insist that the world's largest economy "play by the rules of the road," namely, respecting intellectual-property rights, revaluing its currency to balance trade, allowing greater market access, and loosening control of its near-monopoly on rare-earth materials. From Beijing's perspective, the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) within the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) amounts to the formation of a bloc aimed at the "economic containment of China" and blunting the edge of its trade competitiveness. Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bases its legitimacy on a mix of economic growth, prosperity, unity, and nationalism, foreign policy belligerence could conceivably increase in the event of a sharp economic decline. According to Power Transitions theory, a slowdown in power growth can bring about a shift in external behavior "from one that favors engagement and accommoda-

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<sup>7</sup> Dai Bing, "India building a security barrier against China," *China.org.cn* (February 8, 2010), available at: <[http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/node\\_7078634.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/node_7078634.htm)>.

tion to one that rewards containment and confrontation.”<sup>8</sup> Should a hard-line PLA-backed factional leader mouthing hawkish foreign policy emerge as a winner in the internal power struggle within the CCP, major-powers collusion could lead to the emergence of an “Asian NATO.” As a “new cold war” between the United States and China unfolds, fragile regional institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) will face the prospect of vertical splits into pro- and anti-China states. In this scenario, the risk of competition/conflict increases (a) if the United States fails to manage China’s rise; (b) if China seeks to precipitate the U.S. decline; and (c) if China blocks accommodation of rising India and normalizing Japan in the international system. The specter of an Asian cold war would be the worst-case scenario for regional peace and stability.

#### **Scenario IV: A China-led Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere: Back to the Future?**

In this scenario, the unequal strategic equation between China and its Asian neighbors will eventually force them to capitulate and accept China as the benevolent big brother. Beijing’s best-case scenario is that the United States would, over time, willingly give up its insistence on maintaining the dominant strategic position in Asian, if not world, affairs and reach an understanding with China, just as Great Britain did with the United States after World War II. Just as three decades of China’s double-digit economic growth has succeeded in making China the largest economic partner of nearly all Asian countries, Chinese strategic thinkers calculate that Beijing’s growing military power will eventually detach Asians from the U.S. orbit and lead them to switch their allegiance to China in the security sphere as well.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the Chinese, Asians seemingly lack the

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<sup>8</sup> Jacek Kugler, et al, “Power Transitions and Alliances in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Asian Perspective*(2001), 25:5–29.

<sup>9</sup> Discussions with CICIR and CISS researchers in Beijing, (June 20–27, 2010).

ability to think and plan strategically and mobilize the necessary resources and political will to achieve grand strategic goals. As the power gap widens, the costs and risks of resisting or containing China will be too great to bear. The region could be overwhelmed by Chinese economic blandishments to support regimes politically hostile to the United States and its allies. Faced with the Chinese juggernaut, Asians may well conclude that the prudent course is to cut their losses and slide under the protective umbrella of Chinese hegemony. From Beijing's perspective, this would be the best-case scenario. The sooner the realization dawns on China's neighbors that they can do little to contain China's phenomenal rise and global influence, the better they would be placed to benefit by partnering that growth and sliding into a supporting role. Capitulation to Chinese power by India, Vietnam, and the Philippines would, in turn, propitiate Beijing and prompt it to show magnanimity in settling the territorial/maritime disputes with its erstwhile estranged neighbors.

Some scholars have long argued that China's growing power would enable Beijing to replicate a new version of the old hierarchical Sino-centric tributary state system in time to come and that this would negate the possibility of *realpolitik*-inspired balancing by China's Asian neighbors.<sup>10</sup> Noted China-watcher Ross Terrill maintains that China's long-term strategy is driven by the twin goals of establishing its hegemony in Asia and regaining territories that Beijing feels fall within its sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> Chinese strategic writings indicate a preference for a unipolar Asia with China at the center of regional order and a multipolar world.<sup>12</sup> Naturally, this makes it hard for China to accept any externally imposed barriers to its growth. Through a combination of trade, aid, resource

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, David Kang, "Hierarchy, Balancing, and Empirical Puzzles in Asian International Relations," *International Security* (Winter 2003/04), 28:3, 165–180.

<sup>11</sup> Ross Terrill, "Inside the Chinese mind," *Wilson Quarterly*, (September 2005).

<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the United States prefers a multipolar Asia and a unipolar world. For India, Japan, Russia, and others, a multipolar Asia is essential to achieving their autonomy in decision making. However, China fears a multipolar Asia would degenerate into anti-China alignment.

extraction and infrastructure development, arms sales, and bases, Beijing is extending its strategic perimeter in the Pacific and the Indian oceans.

On a normative level, China's growing global influence will also empower it to lay down new rules for the post-American international order. Evidently, China seems uncomfortable with many of the laws and norms that undergird the international system. With growing global power, and an increasingly nationalistic public opinion at home, Beijing aspires to rewrite the rules on trade, currency, technology, navigation of the seas, water resources, and climate change to protect Chinese interests. China already operates both within and outside the international system, seeking to mold it to serve Chinese interests while at the same time, in effect, working to establish a new Sino-centric regional order. Beijing has been using global norms and conventions and its growing clout in multilateral organizations to promote China's core interests or have its foreign-policy agenda endorsed while defining limits to US power, and marginalizing China's rivals. One can conceive of situations that might produce, singularly or in combination, a scenario wherein Asia accommodates itself to an exponential growth in China's power and accepts Chinese supremacy in the region. From Beijing's perspective, this would be the best-case scenario. However, this scenario could only be realized provided a number of conditions are met.

For example:

- If China can sustain near-double-digit economic growth, and accept the territorial status quo, it would enable Beijing to attract most middle and small powers in support of its leadership role, thereby ushering in a major power shift in Beijing's favor.
- If Beijing can keep the lid on nuclear proliferation in North Korea, and induce the Kim Jung-Un regime to introduce China-style economic reforms, economic growth would take center stage. This would allay the security concerns of

South Korea, Japan, and the United States, and refurbish China's credentials as a troubleshooter and a responsible stakeholder.

- If a demographically and economically shrinking Russia lacks the power (albeit, not the will) to counterbalance China in Central, Southwest, and South Asia, and throws in its lot behind China.
- If Taiwan seeks accommodation with the PRC as the overall balance of economic and military power shifts decisively in Beijing's favor.
- If a sequence of catastrophes weakened India severely, for example, a nuclear conflagration, a two-front war with Pakistan and China, another partition caused by the growing Hindu-Muslim divide, or the success of *jihadi* and Maoist terrorism in unraveling the Indian Union. A "domino effect" could then end in the emergence of several weak and warring states in South Asia, all vying for Chinese aid and support. Short of India's disintegration, if the PLA succeeds in giving India's military a bloody nose, Indian leaders would then be much more deferential in dealing with China and Beijing would not need to worry about the "India challenge" any longer.
- If the US economy goes into free fall following the collapse of the American dollar, culminating in the reduction or withdrawal of the US forward military presence, and if Japan slides into China's orbit following the return of Taiwan to China's fold. In that event, New Delhi's misplaced faith in the US-Japanese duo to enable India's rise as an equal to China would undergo a quick burial. A weakened Russia might also fall short of great Indian expectations. Devoid of great-power backing and left to fend for itself on multiple fronts, New Delhi would want to steer clear of any potential aggravation of or competition with Beijing.
- If a weakened Japan and an isolated India, having fallen so far behind China in relative power terms, chose to cope

with the rise of China by bandwagoning with, rather than balancing against, the superpower on their doorsteps.

### **Conclusion**

China and the Asia-Pacific region stand at a crossroads. Strategic concerns loom large as China's growing power and reach run up against the interests of other powers. China's emergence as the engine of world economic growth means that, short of a major crisis, an explicitly anti-Chinese alignment would be, politically, a hard sell. Of all the scenarios considered above, the one with the highest probability in the near future is that of a combination of weak unipolarity, both at global and regional levels, and a bipolar Asia manifesting in geopolitical competition and selective partnership on transnational issues of mutual interest. The emergence of regional multipolarity could produce stability and peace among the major stakeholders.