For 70 years after the end of World War II, the U.S. has maintained a position of military predominance in the Western Pacific. But the rise of China is changing the power balance in Asia. Even more troubling, the mindset prevailing in Washington and Beijing is increasingly becoming a zero-sum game. To many Americans, the only solution to China's rise is to stay ahead of China militarily and politically by doubling down on defense spending and strengthening relations with U.S. allies in the Pacific region. To many Chinese, this amounts to U.S. encirclement of China, preventing its further development and growth, even undermining its regime. How to de-escalate this growing security competition is the central thesis of the talk by Dr. Michael D. Swaine, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the author of a recent essay *Beyond American Predominance in the Western Pacific: The Need for a Stable U.S.-China Balance of Power*.

Swaine examines the conventional views in Washington and Beijing respectively, as well as their implicit assumptions, and suggests an alternative path to peace and stability. He is fully aware of the difficulties and vulnerabilities with implementing this new path, but he believes that staying on the current path will inevitably lead to a much worse outcome which no one wants to see.

Although many American policy makers would not term it “predominance,” the fact is that the U.S. has been enjoying a preeminent political and military position in the western Pacific for 70 years, allowing it to dispatch with near-impunity surveillance planes right up to the 12 nautical miles of the Chinese territorial airspace. This is increasingly unacceptable to a more regionally active Beijing concerned with security beyond its borders. China favors a real balance of power with greater security along its maritime periphery.

Swaine argues that many Americans incorrectly believe that, as a rising power and with a history of supposed regional dominance, China inevitably desires to eject and replace the U.S. as the preeminent regional power. Swaine refutes this faulty reading of Chinese history and current evidence. In his view, China's goal of a secure periphery and greater respect as a major power is much less ambitious than many Washington pundits presume, and is palatable for Washington to swallow since it does not necessarily threaten the vital interests of the U.S. and its allies. Chinese leaders today want to reduce their vulnerability and increase their economic and political leverage in their own backyard.
Swaine argues that the U.S. should meet this reasonable desire of China with more understanding than resorting to a defensive aggressive posture, which will only lead to disaster. He anticipates that China will not accept U.S. dominance as long as China continues to grow rapidly and increase its military capabilities, a likely prospect (Swaine believes that the PRC regime is unlikely to collapse, as some predict). Thus Swaine proposes to move away from a growing contest over U.S. predominance and to achieve a genuine balance of power in the Pacific. He asserts that this new approach must rest on mutual military and political restraint and accommodation, i.e., the U.S. should limit its aims in the Pacific region while China should not attempt to replace the U.S. or to seek global dominance.

According to the latest Carnegie Endowment study (of which Swaine is a co-author), the U.S. will remain the strongest military power on a global level for many years to come. And U.S. military power in Asia is so strong that even increased Chinese regional military capabilities will not offer Beijing unambiguous superiority. Chinese leaders understand this and are not likely to seek predominance if they feel that they can achieve a decent amount of security in less confrontational ways. Swaine argues for leaving China room to feel more secure, which will in turn alleviate pressure on Washington as it confronts severe limitations on its defense spending.

To establish a genuine balance of power implies that the vital interests of both the U.S. and China are protected, that neither side has clear military domination over at least the first island chain, and that both sides play more equal leadership roles in many hot issues of the west Pacific region. Operationally, it means that the U.S. would leave a stable, neutralized buffer zone for China and not dominate the 500 nautical miles of the Chinese maritime periphery. To achieve this, the U.S. must first consult and reassure its allies, particularly Japan and South Korea, and then reach out to high-level Chinese officials for tacit understanding and military restraint. This framework will enable the U.S. to envision very different prospects for the four hot spots in Asia: the Korean Peninsula, the cross strait relations between Taiwan and mainland China, the South and East China Sea disputes. More amicable prospects for these places will reduce the probability of the U.S. being dragged into wars for reasons not essential to U.S. national interests.

Swaine acknowledges the obstacles to this new approach. Many U.S. policy makers wouldn’t contemplate any alternative to U.S. predominance in the Pacific because the results of any alternative would be too uncertain. They would rather remain on the current path than take on new risks. Swaine recognizes that it will need courageous and far-sighted leadership to change the current course. He does not expect this to happen in a short or intermediate term, but believes that this change of course has to happen in order to avoid serious clashes down the road.