The past 20 years in Asia have been a time of relative peace that has seen Asian governments set aside their differences in order to concentrate on economic growth. At the same time, however, Asia’s economic success—notwithstanding the financial crisis of 1997–1998—is providing many states with the means to act on latent rivalries and ambitions that had previously been subordinated to economic growth. Nationalism, territorial disputes, nuclear rivalry, and the potential rise of a hegemon may all disrupt the present political-military balance in Asia. In short, serious problems confront Asia that, if not well managed, could spell an end to the relative peace the continent has enjoyed for the past two decades.

Asia is, moreover, a region fraught with rivalry, suspicion, and insecurity. As China becomes more powerful, it may well become more assertive. India also has ambitions of becoming a major continental actor and, as evidenced by its 1998 nuclear tests, regards China as its

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1For the purposes of the report, Asia is considered to include Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia as well as China, Australia, and New Zealand. It is roughly equivalent to the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) area of responsibility (AoR), minus the small island-states and territories of the south and southwest Pacific, but including Pakistan. The inclusion of Pakistan is necessary to discuss questions concerning the future of South Asia and U.S.-Indian relations.

2Aaron Friedberg (“Will Europe’s Past Be Asia’s Future?” Survival, Vol. 42, No. 3, Autumn 2000, pp. 147–160) raises the question of whether the current international political situation in Asia possesses disquieting similarities to that of late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe, suggesting that an awareness of these similarities may be an important prerequisite to avoiding the fate of Europe in 1914. In reviewing an earlier draft of this report, Douglas Paal suggested that the appropriate comparison might be to the Asia of a century ago.
primary long-term rival. Similarly, Japan may ultimately move toward a more independent foreign policy. More immediately, Korean unification or reconciliation could change the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

The principal challenge for U.S. regional strategy is to prevent 21st-century Asia from becoming unstable and producing massive conflagrations. Toward this goal, the United States must begin to formulate policies that will enable Asia to develop peacefully and in ways compatible with U.S. national interests. The United States cannot hope to resolve every regional security issue in Asia, but together with its allies it can strive to focus on the larger issues while shaping the smaller ones so that they remain manageable. At the same time, the United States must build a framework for greater regional cooperation in Asia. Enhanced communication and more fully integrated economies will reduce misunderstanding and increase interdependence, thereby diminishing the likelihood of major-power rivalry and armed conflict. Expanded security alliances will further aid in deterring aggression.

To understand the region’s future prospects and potential challenges to U.S. strategy, Chapter Two first examines the changing political-military environment in Asia and discusses possible outcomes. Chapter Three then deals with U.S. strategy for the region. It examines several alternatives for shaping and responding to the future Asian political-military environment and finally recommends a strategy of creating a “dynamic peace.”

Chapter Four examines the military implications of the proposed strategy. It also focuses on possible military missions that the U.S. armed forces might be called on to perform in furtherance of that strategy and the implications for the U.S. Air Force (USAF).

Four appendices examine in greater detail the changing political-military environments in Northeast Asia, China, Southeast Asia, and South Asia.