



China needs friend-making policy

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Rising powers tend to be cocky and pushy. They believe their time has arrived and they want their just desserts — now. So it is with China.

Alas, there's a downside, which Beijing has discovered. Rising powers don't make many friends. The more obnoxious their behavior, the harder it becomes.

If you listen to the debate in the U.S. presidential campaign — not recommended for the faint-hearted! — you'd think America was a helpless Third World state, besieged by enemies deploying vast armies and armadas. It is errant nonsense, of course, but it has a certain popular appeal.

In fact, the U.S. dominates the globe. Among its advantages is being allied with every major industrialized state save China and Russia, and friends with many more.

The latter point underscores America's extraordinary global reach. There are many reasons Washington has so much international clout. Not least is the fact that U.S. policy has emphasized making friends and acquiring allies.

There are downsides to this approach. Nevertheless, overall the U.S. is stronger because it has a cooperative relationship with so many other countries.

As every American knows, their leaders sometimes do stupid things. Yet no one in Asia really believes that the U.S. plans to forcibly seize territory, conquer nations, acquire resources, compel deals, or otherwise impose its will.

Contrast the international response to Beijing's so-called peaceful rise.

The People's Republic of China is essentially friendless. Its one ally of sorts, North Korea, is at best a frenemy. No one else will underwrite Pyongyang, while Beijing fears the consequences of a collapse of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

China has a solid relationship with Pakistan, though that offers only modest benefits, given the latter's weakness and the PRC's lack of nearby military operations requiring support. Ties between Beijing and South Korea were on the upswing, but the Republic of Korea has become disillusioned by China's unwillingness to do more to punish the North.

Until recently Beijing was close to Burma, too close, it seems. One reason the latter's military

stepped into the background and welcomed the relaxation of Western sanctions was to gain breathing room.

Beijing recently moved closer to Thailand, but mostly as a result of Bangkok's estrangement from Washington over the Thai military's seizure of power. The PRC may gain some practical benefits, but is far from forging a long-term, enduring relationship.

Beyond Asia China has gained clout because of its economic prowess, but "winning" in such pariah states as Sudan and Zimbabwe is a dubious accomplishment at best. In Zambia perceived Chinese arrogance became a political issue.

While the PRC has made economic and political gains elsewhere in Africa, they remain limited. During the Cold War Washington made a substantial investment in many of the same nations, with little lasting benefit.

Beijing's most important relationship may be with Russia. But the two nations at most are "strategic partners," and only because the U.S. foolishly pushed them together. Once the West's sanctions end Moscow is likely to look west again.

While China can count on few friends, it has accumulated numerous adversaries. Japan is arming itself, mostly in response to Beijing's aggressive behavior toward the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The Philippines is pushing for a closer military relationship with Washington. Even Vietnam, which with the PRC's support fought a long war against America, is looking toward the U.S. for aid against China.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, has confronted China over illegal fishing. Around the same time Malaysia's defense minister talked of "pushback" by Southeast Asian states against the PRC.

Australia has grown increasingly wary of Beijing despite strong bilateral economic ties. India's relationship with the PRC remains strained because of a territorial conflict running back a half century.

This is an appalling record for Beijing. China's behavior would make U.S.-style alliances difficult for any nation.

The PRC is not an attractive partner for countries which matter. Chinese officials complain that the U.S. is embarked on a policy of "containment." In fact, Beijing is doing much to contain itself.

Given its international ambitions, the PRC needs friends if not formal military allies. But China already is discovering that money does not guarantee love.

If Beijing wants to compete with America globally, the former must follow Washington's lead and build a network of mutually cooperative states. Until now, however, the PRC has been pushing countries away.

China's obnoxious behavior looks likely to continue. If Beijing can't find a way to win favor from at least some of its neighbors and other influential nations around the globe, it may remain a modest geopolitical player.

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