



China's Participation in RIMPAC Exercise: Model for Future Cooperation?

By: Doug Bandow
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The Rim of the Pacific Exercise has begun in waters near Hawaii. For the first time, China is joining the drills. That's a small but positive step for integrating Beijing into more international institutions.

RIMPAC started in 1971 with the U.S., Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and United Kingdom. Now held every two years, the exercise was broadened to include ships from allied and friendly nations. This year there are 23 participants, including the original nations as well as France, India, Indonesia, and South Korea.

And the People's Republic of China. The PRC has sent four ships, a destroyer, hospital ship, missile frigate, and oiler. China's Defense ministry explained that the maneuvers are "an important mission of military diplomacy" and a means to strengthen "friendly relations with countries of the South Pacific through public diplomacy."

Beijing's participation comes at a time of significant regional tension. Most of which is maritime. The PRC's more aggressive stance in asserting its territorial claims in the South China Sea and Sea of Japan have led to threatening confrontations with Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. It is widely believed that China's military has been particularly vocal internally in pressing more extreme demands on the PRC's neighbors.

RIMPAC offers an opportunity to create at least some countervailing pressure in favor of a less threatening regional naval environment. At the political level inviting Beijing to participate demonstrates respect for China's increased military power and international role. Doing so also counters the charge that Washington is seeking to isolate and contain the PRC.

Moreover, inclusion hints at the benefits for Beijing of a civil if not necessarily friendly relationship with its neighbors as well as America. No doubt, the direct pay-off for China from RIMPAC is small. But to be treated as an equal and regular participant in international affairs is advantageous. Especially since the PRC increasingly is being looked at as a potential adversary, especially by surrounding nations.

Although any great power must be prepared to accept unpopularity when necessary, in general a friendly environment is more conducive to ensuring both peace and prosperity. Better that neighboring states view Chinese ships as potential partners than as likely threats.

Military cooperation also is important. As the PRC grows wealthier and the Chinese military grows more sophisticated, Beijing can play a more important role in peacekeeping, anti-piracy patrols, counter-proliferation searches, search-and-rescue efforts, and other international operations. This will reduce the burden on allied forces, increase the reach and capability of worthwhile activities, and demonstrate to Chinese naval officers that there are missions other than challenging the U.S. or other states as enemies.

The PRC's participation in RIMPAC also will provide some valuable human interaction among naval personnel. The exercise typically mixes naval drills with social activities and athletic competitions. Although political relations between the PRC and Western states reflect larger political currents, there is value on putting a human face on sailors from other nations. It is harder to hate an entire people when you've sat down with individuals to have a drink with them.

Of course, participation in one or more military maneuvers is not enough to maintain the peace, especially when the respective governments have been only too willing to play games of international chicken over emotional claims to territory. But including the PRC can be seen as an aspect of a larger allied strategy of inclusion.

Today Beijing remains a revisionist power, determined to overturn past decisions seen as unfair and unreasonable. Its challenge likely will ebb only if it perceives the cost of acting to be greater than the benefit of the status quo, or at least a more modest reform course achievable through negotiation.

Costs already are rising for China as Japan begins to take a more active military role, countries like the Philippines welcome Tokyo's increased activism, and the Southeast Asian states look further afield, including to India, for allies. Even worse from the PRC's standpoint, most of these nations are attempting to pull Washington more directly into their affairs. The ultimate result could be a military coalition that even a stronger China will not want to challenge.

At the same time, Beijing needs to see that the benefits from cooperating also are rising. RIMPAC alone offers only a modest pay-off. But the U.S. and the PRC's neighbors should think creatively about other activities and organizations that might entice greater Chinese involvement. For instance, perhaps the exclusion of China from the TPP should be rethought. The more invested the PRC in the existing system, the less likely Zhongnanhai's residents would be to risk disrupting the system. The more the People's Liberation Army and other services can be shown the benefits of peaceful cooperation, the better.

There's always been a naïve affliction in the West that deep-seated political and ideological differences melt away with a little friendship diplomacy. The gulf between China's authoritarian system of state capitalism and America's democratic system with looser economic control is great. Yet the best sales force for America tend to be Americans in business, education,

athletics, culture, and even the military—so long as participants are not shooting at each other, of course.

The last couple of years have not been kind to the PRC's "peaceful rise." America and China's neighbors increasingly are looking at Chinese naval vessels as a threat. However, RIMPAC showcases them in a different role. It will be up to Beijing, its Pacific neighbors, and the U.S. to find other opportunities to further invest the PRC in the existing geopolitical order.

Doing so won't be enough to keep the peace in the decades ahead. But it would nonetheless be a useful step in the right direction.

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