

Include China in 2016 RIMPAC Exercise: “Punishing” Beijing by Exclusion Would Be Short-Sighted

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June 3, 2015

Last year China joined the Rim of the Pacific Exercise for the first time. There were 23 participants and six observers. RIMPAC began back in 1971 with just America, Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and New Zealand.

However, Beijing’s role has become controversial. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain recently opined: “I would not have invited them this time because of their bad behavior.” He pointed to aggressive behavior on the part of the People’s Republic of China in surrounding waters: “I don’t think there is any doubt about their territorial ambitions.”

The Obama administration is conflicted. Adm. Jonathan Greenert, Chief of Naval Operations, is in favor. Bloomberg’s Josh Rogin reports that the Office of the Secretary of Defense is against and the White House is undecided.

Rogin worries that “so far, China is paying no price for its aggression.” Michael Auslin of the American Enterprise Institute focused on “their attitude and behavior,” arguing that if they don’t meet your standards, “they haven’t earned another invite back.” The Diplomat’s Ankit Panda contended that the U.S. “may have more to gain by excluding China from the exercise going forward, barring a major shift in China’s behavior.” Bonnie Glaser of CSIS suggested holding the threat “over China’s head.” Patrick Cronin of the Center for a New American Security was less certain, acknowledging benefits of China’s inclusion: “It all depends on what you think RIMPAC should be.”

That is the key question. In part the exercise is about mutually beneficial cooperation for non-military purposes. With the simultaneous growth in commercial traffic and national navies, there likely will be increasing need and opportunity for joint search and rescue, operational safety, anti-piracy patrols, and humanitarian relief. Chinese involvement would reduce the burden on the U.S. and allied navies and highlight reasons for cooperating with rather than fighting against them.

The question also involves military-military cooperation. Contacts between the Chinese and U.S. navies are few; those between the PRC's forces and those of countries at odds with Beijing's territorial claims, such as Japan and the Philippines, are even fewer. Obviously, there always will be important security considerations. Apparently Secretary Ashton Carter vetoed the navy's willingness to accede to a Chinese request for a visit from and access to an American carrier.

Nevertheless, there is value in allowing potential opponents a better assessment of one's capabilities. Every armed service should plan for the worst case, but their expectations may be more realistic if they have a better sense of what and whom they might face. It might be particularly useful for the PRC's sailors to confront the navies of their neighbors, which are expanding and becoming more competent. China likely will be the dominant military power, outside of America, but the former's navy will not sail unopposed.

Moreover, demystifying the other side makes it harder to demonize them. Obviously, even warm personal relationships don't prevent governments from careening off to war with one another. However, learning that the other side's military personnel are not devils incarnate might cause leaders to at least temper the advice they offer in a crisis. (In 1941 Japanese Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, who knew America, reportedly warned that the Pearl Harbor attack would merely rouse the sleeping giant.) Such benefits might be speculative, but likely real.

Participation in the exercise also may be viewed as evidence that the U.S. is or is not attempting to contain the PRC. Inviting China in last year was a public affirmation that Beijing had a welcome role to play in regional naval affairs. Hence American policy toward China looked a little less like containment.

Unfortunately, RIMPAC is too small and unimportant to much matter. No one who looks at U.S. behavior, and certainly no Chinese official who does so, can believe that Washington is engaged in anything except containment. Granted, it can be pursued more or less ostentatiously and comprehensively. However, strengthening alliances surrounding China, moving more military forces to the Asia-Pacific, bolstering the militaries of neighboring states, and consistently backing the positions taken by the PRC's antagonists outweigh an invitation to naval maneuvers every two years.

Finally, participation can be seen as a reward and denial as a punishment for China. No doubt, relations have grown tenuous. Beijing has sharply challenged other nations' territorial claims throughout shared waters in the Asia-Pacific. The U.S. has gotten directly involved, backing allies' claims and planning to increase American military patrols through contested spaces.

Thus, Panda suggests barring Beijing participation so long as it does not respect freedom of navigation. Indeed, in his view doing so is the perfect Goldilocks punishment. He wrote: “The magnitude is severe enough to condition China’s behavior while not derailing decades of fragile U.S.-China goodwill altogether.”

If all it took to bring to heel America’s looming co-superpower and peer competitor—whether it ever achieves such a position remains problematic—was cancelling its navy out of a nonessential ocean exercise, Washington should have tried that tactic long ago. The PRC likely prefers to join than to sit at the sidelines. However, the benefits remain too small to cause China’s leaders to change fundamental policy objectives.

The PRC is a revisionist power, as America once was. The former will seek to reverse or overturn past geopolitical decisions which it believes to be unfair or unrealistic. Beijing will abandon that course only when the costs of doing so rise sufficiently. “Losing” China’s RIMPAC invitation won’t make a difference. In contrast, an increasingly well-armed and well-organized set of neighbors willing to stand up to Chinese bullying would.

The belief that friendship diplomacy can eliminate ideological differences and geopolitical concerns is a common but naïve affliction in America. Nevertheless, there would be real, though limited, benefits to inviting Beijing to participate in RIMPAC again next year.

To reinforce its impact the U.S. and its allies and friends should seek other opportunities to invest China in a stable geopolitical order. And to offer Beijing a peaceful means to win geopolitical adjustments in a changing world. That won’t be easy, but extending another invitation to RIMPAC would be a worthwhile step in the meantime.

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