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Accommodating China on the Rise

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The international order is ever-changing. Sometimes the shifts are evolutionary. China's dramatic reentry on the world stage looks more revolutionary. The U.S. should treat Beijing's "rise" with special care.

Once a great empire, China fell into near terminal decline in the 19th century. The West exploited it as an illimitable commercial market, little more. Despite its close proximity, Japan had scarcely more regard for its populous neighbor. The 20th century saw war and revolution ravage this once proud empire.

Today, for the first time in hundreds of years, the People's Republic of China is fulfilling its great potential. The PRC has surpassed Japan as the world's second largest economy. Chinese economic ties now outpace those of both Japan and the U.S. throughout East Asia. Beijing also is entering markets in both Africa and South America. By some estimates the PRC could pass America within the decade.

China's economic growth has generated fears that Beijing will soon become a military superpower as well. The PRC's military outlays are rising and China has grown more assertive in setting its maritime policy and making territorial claims in the "Near Seas." Moreover, anger over U.S. arms sales to Taiwan led to suspension of bilateral military exchanges.

The result has been abundant fodder for Americans inclined to demonize the PRC. Yet that is precisely the wrong reaction. Neither nation, nor the world, can afford conflict between the two in the coming years. In contrast, so much could be achieved through cooperation between the world's superpower and the world's incipient superpower.

As Adm. Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote after returning from his July visit to the PRC: "We're both maritime nations with long coastlines and economies dependent on unhindered trade. We both face threats of drug trafficking, piracy and the movement of weapons of mass destruction. We both want stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Pakistan. We both recognize the need for coordinated international humanitarian aid and disaster relief."

While economic disputes are real, a shared interest in economic growth seems likely to keep the two countries working together. The danger of military confrontation looms much greater. The basic problem is simple: the U.S. is determined to maintain its dominance in East Asia, while China is equally determined to free itself from American military threats.

Indeed, the problem was exhibited by Adm. Mullen's admission that "We still don't fully understand China's justification for the rapid growth in its defense spending or its long-term military modernization goals." It's a curiously naive or disingenuous comment coming from the top military officer of the nation which spends as much as the rest of the world combined to support an armed services capable of waging war anywhere on earth. The PRC wants to defend itself from the U.S.

Americans obviously believe in their good intentions and in their nation's policies. However, it would help to step back and reverse the geopolitical map. Assume for a moment that China was allied with states bordering the U.S.—Mexico, Cuba, and Canada, for instance. Assume that Chinese fleets roamed close to American shores. And assume that Beijing insisted on its right to intervene in disputes between Washington and Washington's neighbors.

Americans would not sit idly by. Rather, they would do precisely what Beijing is doing, build a military capable of deterring foreign intervention.

The U.S. will remain largely impervious to attack from China or any other nation. What Washington faces is a steady erosion of its relative status. America's ability to unilaterally reshape the international order, maintain the global commons, and mandate geopolitical outcomes will ebb. Especially when it comes to China.

How the U.S. responds is critical. It could treat the PRC as a putative enemy, initiate a massive arms build-up, and browbeat allies into joining a policy of containment. Such an approach almost certainly would fail—the American people won't want to break an already weak economy while Asian states won't want to become permanent enemies of their big neighbor. Most important, treating China as an enemy likely would turn it into one, which would be geopolitical folly on a grand scale.

Instead, Washington must accommodate the PRC's interests and ambitions. That doesn't mean abandoning important interests and inviting Chinese domination. It does mean acknowledging the legitimacy of Beijing's objectives, emphasizing the importance of cooperation in meeting shared ends, and ensuring the peaceful resolution of disputes. Just as the U.S. insists that China leave its navy at home when managing territorial differences with Japan and Southeast Asian states, Washington should not constantly wave the club of military intervention against the PRC.

Some analysts have suggested reaching a "grand bargain" with China. That won't be easy, since some issues, such as the status of Taiwan, remain both complicated and contentious.

However, a succession of smaller improvements could add up to a large advance in relations. The restoration of bilateral military ties was important. Expanded PRC military transparency would bring added benefits. Lowering the temperature of trade disputes on both sides would help. An acknowledgement from Washington that American fiscal policies have been irresponsible, as charged by Beijing, would introduce a degree of honesty. A firm commitment by China to resolve regional disputes peacefully would ease minds. And so on.

The last time a dominant power faced a rising power the results were divided. Great Britain accommodated the U.S. but confronted Imperial Germany. The former policy resulted in prosperity and friendship; the latter policy caused war and hardship. Washington (and Beijing) policymakers should take note of the different outcomes.

The most important relationship of this century will be that between America and China. This must be a century of cooperation rather than confrontation. Both sides have much work to do.

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