

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

U.S.-China cooperation

By Doug Bandow

August 1, 2014

The latest Rim of the Pacific Exercise is underway in waters near Hawaii. For the first time, China joined the drills. It was a small but positive step for integrating Beijing into more international institutions.

RIMPAC started in 1971. Now held every two years, the exercise includes ships from numerous allied and friendly nations. This year there are 23 participants, including the People's Republic of China.

The PRC 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. The PRC's more aggressive stance in asserting its territorial claims in the South China Sea and Sea of Japan have led to dangerous confrontations with Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam.

RIMPAC offers an opportunity to create 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, a friendly environment is more conducive to ensuring both peace and prosperity. Better for Beijing 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 and search-and-rescue efforts. This demonstrates to Chinese naval officers that there are missions other than challenging the U.S. or other states as enemies.

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 challenges 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, and affected countries attempt to pull Washington more directly into their affairs. At the same time, Beijing needs to see that the benefits from cooperating also are rising.

RIMPAC alone offers only a modest payoff. But the U.S. and the PRC's neighbors should think creatively about other activities and organizations which might entice greater Chinese involvement. It's one reason to rethink the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact's exclusion of Beijing.

The more invested China is in the existing order, the less likely Zhongnanhai's residents would be to risk disrupting the system. To the extent the People's Liberation Army and other services can be shown the benefits of peaceful cooperation, so much the better.

Of course, a little friendship diplomacy cannot close the gulf between China and America. But the best sales force for America tend to be Americans, including in the military – at least when participants are not shooting at each other, of course.

The U.S. and China's neighbors increasingly look 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 be a useful step in the right direction.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan.