

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

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## Globo-Cop

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China is becoming more assertive, pressing its claims in the South China Sea and expanding its relationship with Third World states. The Chinese economy is passing that of Japan. Beijing's military build-up continues. Yet the threat so far posed by the People's Republic of China, even to Taiwan, is small. The PRC remains a relatively poor nation, with a per capita GDP trailing Albania, Turkmenistan, and Cuba. Beijing's neighbors are well-armed. And China can take nothing for granted, having been at war with India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and Vietnam over the last century. Most important, the PRC is incapable of threatening the U.S. Beijing's program of military expansion is real, but so far limited in effect. China is becoming a regional power. It is a decade or more away from being a genuine global power. And it will be years if not decades beyond that before the PRC is a peer of America, capable of matching U.S. power on a world scale.

That should be seen as good news, at least in America. However, some Washington policymakers see no meaningful difference between the ability to defend American and the

ability to attack China.

Yet that difference is critical.

The latest Pentagon report on Chinese military developments states the obvious:

The pace and scope of China's military modernization have increased over the past decade, enabling China's armed forces to develop capabilities to contribute to the delivery of international public goods, as well as increase China's options for using military force to gain diplomatic advantage or resolve disputes in its favor.

The PRC has been involved in a long process of military modernization. At first the emphasis was home defense. The large but primitive People's Liberation Army was modernized. Air and naval capabilities were improved. Quality was substituted for quantity.

But steady economic growth generated resources available for equally steady hikes in military outlays. That allowed Beijing to change emphasis. Notes the Department of Defense: "Earlier this decade, China began a new phase of military development by articulating roles and missions for the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) that go beyond China's immediate territorial interests."

The Pentagon expresses its pleasure that the PRC is involved in peacekeeping and humanitarian activities. However, the report tactfully states no opinion of Chinese investments which "have allowed the PLA to pursue anti-access and area-denial strategies," as well as "to improve the PLA's ability for extended-range power projection." One could imagine Chinese officials making a similar assessment, praising Washington for its peacekeeping and international relief operations, but indicating disquiet at America's disproportionate power projection capabilities.

Although there may come a day when the PRC is able to threaten U.S. territory with conventional forces, "China's ability to sustain military power at a distance, today, remains limited," explains DOD. Beijing's efforts in this regard run into the same constraint facing the American military: it costs a lot more to intervene halfway around the globe than to defend against a power mounting such an operation.

Far more relevant to Washington's current plans is China's ongoing attempt at area denial. Although the PRC long has focused on strengthening military capabilities vis-à-vis Taiwan, that policy blends into a desire to deter the U.S. from intervening in any cross-strait crisis. More broadly, Beijing wants to prevent any power, and especially the U.S., from acting against China or China's interests elsewhere. In this regard Beijing has achieved significant success, steadily raising the cost of any American military action against the PRC.

First, China has improved its strategic nuclear forces, including "adding more survivable delivery systems," says the Pentagon. That ensures against any foreign attempt at intimidation or preemption. While such a policy seems inconceivable today, Beijing surely remembers that the Johnson administration considered just such proposals. The PRC does not need to match the U.S. arsenal, only deter U.S. decision-makers. For similar reasons the Chinese military has been emphasizing asymmetric warfare. Reports DOD:

Examples include the heavy reliance on ballistic and cruise missiles rather than stealth aircraft, to attack ground targets inside heavily defended airspace; an array of systems to attack intelligence, communications, and navigation satellites, seeking to

neutralize the U.S. advantage in space; an approach to computer network exploitation that harvests huge volumes of data; an emphasis on offensive and defensive electronic warfare in recent years; and the 'three warfares' doctrine.

Equally obvious is the desire of Chinese policymakers to construct a conventional deterrent. Explains the Pentagon, "China's approach to dealing with this challenge is manifest in a sustained effort to develop the capability to attack, at long ranges, military forces that might deploy or operate within the western Pacific." To do so the PRC is augmenting its force of anti-ship ballistic missiles, conventional and nuclear-powered attack submarines, guided missile destroyers, and marine strike aircraft. Perhaps most notably, observes DOD, "China has the most active land-based ballistic and cruise missile program in the world."

No doubt, the PRC increasingly poses a geopolitical challenge to America. But it is a challenge, which Washington should accommodate rather than confront. The emerging debate over U.S. military spending will force a decision on this policy choice sooner rather than later.

Inveterate hawks see a new Yellow Peril. In the most fevered minds, Beijing desires war and plans to destroy America. For them China warrants a Cold War military budget without a Cold War, despite Washington's deteriorating finances. Yet there is a very real difference between the old Maoist revolutionary state and today's conservative nationalist regime. While the latter's ambitions are real—they at least extend to Taiwan and South China Sea islands—Beijing has evidenced no desire to conquer surrounding nations. And it certainly has no reason to go to war with America. Even if it did, the PRC will lack the necessary capability for years and probably decades.

Although China is spending more than before, it is not catching up with the U.S. The Pentagon figures Chinese outlays to be around \$150 billion. Strip out expenditures on Afghanistan and Iraq and Washington still spends three to four times as much as China. At the same time, the U.S. is allied with most of China's neighbors. If Beijing wants to catch up, let alone pass America militarily, it needs to do a lot more a lot more quickly. For instance, the Pentagon suggests that the Chinese navy is making "progress toward its first aircraft carrier (a refurbished ex-Russian Kuznetsov-class carrier)." That would be more impressive if the U.S. didn't have 11 carrier groups in being, with fully trained sailors and pilots. Two of the planet's other four carriers are in the British navy, which is closely allied with America. The third is possessed by India, which is no fan of Chinese power. The last goes to Russia, which isn't likely to steam to Beijing's aid in any war.

The real issue is how much Americans are willing to spend to police the globe, especially East Asia. Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently spoke of weapons which "could threaten America's primary way to project power." More specifically, testified Wallace C. Gregson, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, before Congress earlier this year:

China is developing military capabilities "that are destabilizing to regional military balances, that could restrict access to the maritime, air, space, and cyberspace domains, or that could enable China to exercise military aggression or coercion against its neighbors.

In short, the problem is not America defending America. It is America defending East Asian countries. And while Beijing's military expansion makes its neighbors nervous, the desire to "challenge our freedom of action," as Pacific Commander Admiral Robert Willard put it, is to be expected. What China wants to do is prevent an attack by the U.S. American policymakers may

believe that they have good reason to threaten war, but it is unreasonable, and certainly unrealistic, to expect other nations to forever remain militarily naked as a matter of convenience to Washington.

It is time for a fundamental shift in U.S. strategy. The Cold War was unique in that Washington saw the defense of allied states as an important part of a global struggle with the Soviet Union, a hegemonic and ideological power. Protecting allies was seen as necessary to preserve American security. This struggle ended in 1989, if not before.

For the next two decades the U.S. enjoyed a “unipolar moment,” with the ability to assert its will around the globe at little military risk (though terrorism turned out to be an unexpected cost of an interventionist foreign policy). American policymakers have grown used to issuing diktats to subordinate powers. But this period, too, is ending, with a number of nations, including China, taking steps to forestall future U.S. attempts at coercion.

The problem is not just that a wealthier PRC can spend more on its military. An increasingly indebted America cannot spend more on its military. With a \$1.3 trillion deficit this year and a more than \$100 trillion unfunded liability for Social Security and Medicare, Uncle Sam no longer can afford the price tag for being Globo-Cop. Which means the U.S. needs to prepare to become a much more normal nation. It will still be the first among equals for many years. But it will no longer be able to use its military to impose its will on every other nation—and certainly not be able to do so at reasonable cost and risk far from home.

Even the Bush administration refused to confront Russia in its war with Georgia. Future administrations are unlikely to consider war with China over Taiwan. India, with a nuclear arsenal and sizable conventional force, is likely to join the “no go” parade next. Others will eventually follow. Rather than bankrupt the American people trying to increase military outlays sufficient to overawe all of Washington’s potential adversaries, U.S. policymakers should build a smaller force capable of defending America from all-comers and intervening in only the very limited number of foreign conflicts likely to be genuinely important for U.S. security. If China turned out to be an expansionist power with globally hegemonic ambitions, Washington could back friendly states like Japan. But there would be no American armada sailing to ensure that the Filipino flag flies over the Spratly Islands.

John Bolton argues for “confronting China’s snarl” rather than allowing Beijing’s “aggressiveness to go unchecked.” However, if the PRC’s more assertive behavior is a wake-up call, it is primarily meant for China’s neighbors. The ASEAN states, Australia, Japan, and South Korea all have grown more nervous about Beijing’s intentions. They should back up their wariness with military force. After all, they have more at stake than does the U.S., which has more than fulfilled its obligation by defending the region for the last 65 years.

Washington has obvious differences with the PRC, and should present its position firmly when justified. But none of these disputes is important enough to trigger war. That was the case even when America’s military was far superior to China’s armed forces. The case for cooperation rather than confrontation is even more obvious today, when “China can reach out and hit the U.S. well before the U.S. can get close enough to the mainland to hit back,” observes Toshi Yoshihara of the U.S. Naval War College.

Indeed, the catastrophic consequences of Germany’s disruptive entry into Europe’s established order illustrate the importance of restraint on all sides in China. John Lee of Australia’s Centre for Independent Studies warns: “China’s overestimation of its own capabilities, and underestimation of American strengths and resolve—combined with strategic dissatisfaction and

impatience—is the fast way toward disastrous miscalculation and error.”

In today’s world Washington policymakers need to focus more on defense than offense. America’s unipolar moment is ending. Better to adapt to the new reality than wreck the U.S. economy attempting to maintain an unrealistic military primacy, which benefits allied nations far more than American citizens.

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