

China is a Problem, But the U.S. Must not Treat Beijing as an Enemy

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The Cold War ended three decades ago. People around the world breathed more freely. For a brief moment the U.S. government cut military budgets and reduced armament levels.

However, many American policymakers seem to fear living in a world without an enemy. The Trump administration has targeted the People's Republic of China. Vice President Mike Pence recently spoke of the challenges posed by Beijing—economic, ideological, military, and political. He denounced the PRC for “using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors, while militarizing features in the South China Sea” and announced that Washington would no longer ignore such threats.

In justifying the Pentagon's latest budget proposal, acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan intoned “China, China, China.” He told the Senate Armed Services Committee that “We've been ignoring the problem for too long.”

When the People's Republic of China first turned toward economic reform and international engagement, many Americans imagined it morphing into a liberal democratic republic. However, today Beijing is moving backwards at a rapid rate. The Trump administration focused on economic issues, but potentially more significant is the expansion of authoritarian, even totalitarian controls. Beyond its own borders the PRC is offering a competing model of economic opportunity, mixed with political control.

Despite its international ambitions, China's principal challenge to America is not its military. Washington's armed forces far outrange those of China in scope and experience. The U.S. has a vast nuclear advantage. America's navy roams around the globe, deploying 11 aircraft carriers. Beijing has one, with two more under construction. Washington deploys air and ground forces throughout the Asia-Pacific, while the PRC has no forces within range of the U.S.

China is investing heavily in its military, and might eventually match Washington's armed forces. However, given America's lead, that would take years or decades. Even then the PRC would not seriously threaten the U.S. Deterrence works.

The chief military challenge posed by China is its determination to prevent America from dominating the former's neighborhood. Washington has an interest in maintaining navigational freedom, but that is not currently at risk, since Beijing cannot prevent American access. Indeed, the PRC has consciously avoided direct confrontation with Washington, for good reason.

Although the U.S. benefits from its unnaturally expansive role in East Asia, the cost of maintaining that against a rising power like China will become ever more expensive. It costs the

U.S. far more to build and protect a carrier than for Beijing to sink one. Hence the Pentagon's concern over so-called anti-access/area denial.

While the military hopes to minimize the price it must pay to intervene at will, force projection is inherently more costly than deterrent action. How much is Washington prepared to pay and how many risks is Washington prepared to take to overpower the PRC along the latter's own border? War with China, a nuclear-armed power, would be an extraordinarily high price to pay for any objective short of an existential threat to America.

Better for the U.S. to treat Beijing as a geopolitical problem to be solved. The PRC is far from ready to dominate the region, let alone the globe. China is surrounded by nations with which it has been at war in recent decades—Russia, India, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Beijing's assertiveness has spurred its neighbors to arm and organize against it. The Philippines is urging Japan to do more. India is cooperating with Vietnam and other nations in the region.

China remains a poor country likely to face lower growth rates due to increased political interference in the economy. The demographic overhang from the one-child policy may leave the country old before it becomes rich. The PRC's belt and road initiative is creating political antagonism and bad debts. Politically, President Xi Jinping appears to be simultaneously on the summit and at the precipice. Beijing must confront these and other challenges before it could become a global hegemon.

None of this is to underestimate the PRC's potential. However, it is not today's dominant power. It is not destined to become tomorrow's dominant power. And even a more prosperous, powerful China would not necessarily threaten fundamental American interests. Argued Joshua Shiffrin of Boston University: "Not only is it wrong to assume that rising states such as China tend to invariably challenge existing great powers but, relative to what China might be doing, China's recent assertiveness is far from a clear-cut challenge to the United States."

Instead of emphasizing military remedies, which will become ever harder to support as the federal budget explodes from the costs of America's aging population, the U.S. should focus on the PRC's political and economic roles. To do so, Washington should start by fixing its own policies.

Equally important, Washington should not treat China as an enemy. Doing so is far more likely to turn it into one. Threatening Chinese interests is likely to spur a hostile Chinese response. Noted Shiffrin, "Under certain conditions, a less activist American foreign policy may do more than most pundits expect to encourage Chinese cooperation."

While the U.S. may not like today's changing global balance of power, it was the transformative rising power in the 19th century. Imagine how the U.S. would respond if China sent its navy along America's West Coast, lectured the U.S. about its policy toward Cuba, and debated the necessity of war with Washington. Americans would think more about conflict than cooperation.

There has been much talk about the "Thucydides Trap," involving the interaction between rising and falling powers. Washington and Beijing are likely to face numerous challenges in their complicated international dance in the 21st century. But the two states can, and must, work to reduce the likelihood of conflict.

Americans should be confident in their future. China poses a serious challenge, but Washington can do much to prevent relations from turning violent. Which is essential for both nations and, frankly, the rest of the world.

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