

The Imperative of Sino-American Accommodation: Peace a Must with No Core Interests in Conflict

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Dominant powers rarely give way graciously. Great Britain only reluctantly accepted America's rise and refused to similarly yield to the emerging German giant on the European continent. The U.S. has discouraged independent European actors, advanced NATO to shrunken Russia's borders, and ringed China with bases and forces.

Conflict often results during power transitions. It took two world wars to sort out Britain's and Germany's roles: both receded from the international summit though, ironically, the latter, while the military loser, is the greater economic power today. While most of Europe would fight for little if anything, Moscow recently beat up two of its weaker neighbors to force Washington to respect Russia's much diminished interests.

The U.S. and People's Republic of China have yet to come to blows, but escalating tensions before Donald Trump even took office highlighted the potential dangers of estrangement. Washington continues to insist on running the globe, setting the rules, and ordering everyone about. However, the world increasingly is unwilling to cooperate. Certainly Beijing is in no mood to kowtow to America.

Since the end of the Cold War the U.S. has been the most aggressive nation on earth and possesses the world's most powerful military. But Washington has grown used to threatening or battling military midgets: Haiti, Panama, Somali warlords, Bosnian Serbs, Serbia, Afghanistan's Taliban, Iraq, Libya's faltering Khadafy regime, the Islamic State. And most of these conflicts ended unsatisfactorily, sometimes even embarrassingly.

Backing into war with the PRC would be far worse. China possesses nuclear weapons—far fewer than in America's arsenal, but enough to loose mass death and destruction on any nation targeted. The People's Liberation Army would be no pushover, and the PRC is far too big to conquer, occupy, and remake.

Nor is the international climate conducive for American dominance. The Obama administration, with full support of the Neoconservative hawks who dominate the Republican Party, especially in Congress, have managed to reverse Richard Nixon's great strategic opening to the PRC and

pushed Russia and China together against the U.S. Much naturally divides Moscow and Beijing, but Washington's militaristic meddling is encouraging the two to cooperate. Nor are America's allies and the PRC's neighbors nearly so enthused about the potential for conflict as are the GOP's hawks.

Worse, even victory in war would only set the stage for future conflict, just as the Versailles Treaty proved to be but a truce for a generation while the combatants recovered their wind. Beijing and Washington need to peer into the future, however darkly, and choose a different course.

The U.S. should learn from Great Britain's policy toward the rabidly nationalistic rising giant on the North American continent. After fighting two wars with its one-time colonists, Britain wisely chose peace. London settled border disputes despite America's unreasonable demands; accepted an outrageous diktat excluding European powers from Latin America; avoided conflict despite American maritime violations of neutral rights during the Civil War; and accepted U.S. naval parity and eventual superiority. As a result, an important international partnership endures today.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration appears inclined toward conflict. The President seems determined to trigger a trade war, apparently believes Beijing can be bullied into imposing regime change in Pyongyang, and even before placing a foreign policy team in place challenged the PRC with U.S. encouragement of Taiwanese independence. Trump is pouring gasoline all over the relationship. Alas, it didn't take long for a match to be lit, in this case the Chinese seizure of the underwater drone, which could have ended very badly.

Adviser and former CIA Director James Woolsey proposed "a grand bargain in which the U.S. accepts China's political and social structure and commits not to disrupt it in any way in exchange for China's commitment not to challenge the status quo in Asia." However, that's no deal from the PRC's standpoint. Despite Chinese insecurities, there's little in practice that Washington can do to overthrow the quasi-fascist regime which currently governs China. And for a rising power, one that may eventually match U.S. economic and military strength, to complacently accept permanent American dominance along its border would be intolerable.

Imagine London insisting that residents of the U.S. acquiesce to British naval patrols up the East Coast and throughout the Caribbean. Britain dictating American behavior toward Cuba and other nearby territories. British military bases in Mexico, Canada, and throughout the Caribbean. A "pivot" or "rebalance" through which Britain moved military units from Europe and Asia to the Americas. Public debates in London about the potential for war with the U.S. America's reaction would not have been polite.

Washington is almost frivolously courting conflict. There is no clash of fundamental interests. The two nations are not striving to control the same land mass. There are no disputed territorial claims. Beijing is not threatening to invade America or seize America's Pacific possessions. There is no danger of military domination of Eurasia. Indeed, China is encircled by potential adversaries—India, Russia, Korea, Vietnam, Japan—several of which are backed by Washington.

The U.S. has legitimate interests, but they are limited: free navigation, which the PRC has not threatened; commercial cyberwar, which apparently has been tamed by agreement; abusive trade practices, though the U.S. is no economic virgin; violation of human rights, but Washington ignores equal crimes in Saudi Arabia, Central Asia, Egypt, and other “friendly” states; security of allied nations, though Beijing has threatened the independence of no state other than Taiwan, which historically was controlled by China; and North Korea, but Washington’s containment strategy discourages Chinese action against Beijing’s sole military ally.

None of these cases warrant the possibility of war.

Perhaps President Trump is playing an elaborate geopolitical game for diplomatic advantage. If so, he will need to deploy more than bluster and provocation. And he will need to plan carefully lest his policies trigger a violent reaction. Peace and security for both America and China, and East Asia, are at stake.

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