



As the U.S. and China Compete, they must Avoid Military Confrontation

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October 24, 2017

The Trump administration's most avid proponent of war against China, Steve Bannon, has departed the White House. At least one voice for potentially violent confrontation between Beijing and Washington no longer sits a short distance away from President Donald Trump.

Nevertheless, Chas Freeman, the main interpreter for Richard Nixon on the latter's historic to China in 1972, recently warned that the U.S. and Chinese militaries "are now very far along in planning and practicing how to go to war with each other."

Practice doesn't always make perfect, of course. Washington and Moscow emerged from the Cold War having sparred militarily through surrogates, but never directly and openly with each other. The possibility of a conventional fight turning nuclear helped deter both governments from escalating issues of only modest importance.

Yet the unnerving spectacle of President Trump sounding and acting a lot like his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong-un offered a stark reminder that the possibility of an Asian war is real. And even a small conflict could draw in both America and the People's Republic of China, with horrendous consequences.

The flashpoints don't involve any unresolvable clash of vital interests between the latter two countries. Rather, as Freeman pointed out, the potential military contingencies reflect "an imbalance of power left over from history. U.S. forces are forward-deployed along China's frontiers in a pattern that originated with the Cold War policy of 'containment'."

Washington officials hope to preserve America's military dominance everywhere on earth, with the ability to defeat any nation anywhere at any time. That's an attractive vision for policymakers used to basking in the world's deference but is not necessary to protect the U.S.—its people and their territory, liberties, and prosperity. To the contrary, the tendency to treat advancing even the most peripheral interest as warranting war today means that America is never at peace.

Its recent opponents have been military nullities: Serbia, Afghanistan's Taliban, Iraq, Libya, Islamic State. So even when things went wrong—as they did in every case, usually creating more problems than were solved—the American people barely noticed. Casualties were relatively low, the money wasted was covered by additional borrowing. Hubris continued to envelop the U.S. capital.

However, conflict with the PRC would be far different. Although war is neither inevitable nor imminent, there are several dangerous flashpoints. First is North Korea. Although Beijing recently made clear that it would not defend the North if the latter triggered a war, China's position if the U.S. inaugurated a preventative conflict is not so clear. Simply presuming that Beijing would not respond in some way could be a huge miscalculation.

Second is the South China Sea and other contentious territorial issues. None of these controversies directly concern the U.S., but Washington has extended defense guarantees to Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea, which cover all possessions, irrespective of legal status.

The PRC's claims are excessive, sometimes even outrageous, but that is standard behavior for an aggressive, nationalistic, rising power. Just look at the young American republic, which in 1846 attacked its neighbor Mexico and seized half of the latter's land. The U.S. has an interest in freedom of navigation throughout the western Pacific, but no cause for war over whether Manila or Beijing should control Scarborough Shoal.

Indeed, the presumed rightness of America's cause is less important than China's imperative to secure its homeland from U.S. threat. If the PRC navy was patrolling America's Eastern seaboard and the Caribbean, Washington policymakers would perceive it as a threat and act accordingly.

Third is Taiwan. Since 1895 the Taiwanese have not been under the mainland's control except briefly and have made themselves a nation, both capitalist and democratic. Alas, Chinese policymakers and people alike still consider the island of Formosa to belong to Beijing. Americans may consider that to be unreasonable, but in 1861 the U.S. national government refused to allow America's southern states to go in peace and launched an invasion that ultimately killed upwards of 750,000 people.

Nationalism remains as powerful a force today as then. No PRC government is likely to voluntarily relinquish its claim to Taiwan. Washington has a lengthy if ambiguous military commitment to Taipei. Taiwan deserves to be independent, but that cause, though worthy, cannot justify American participation in a war against China.

Although the U.S. almost certainly would defeat Beijing in any conflict growing out of any of these circumstances, American forces might suffer some unpleasant surprises at the hands of a rapidly improving Chinese military. Moreover, in a real war with a real country—not the sort of walkover the Pentagon has come to expect when bombing ill-prepared Third World nations—escalation to nuclear weapons would be possible. Again, Washington, with a vastly more powerful arsenal, would “win,” but at potentially horrendous cost.

Finally, even victory, whatever that meant, would not likely be final. Imperial Germany was decisively defeated in World War I and in 1919 agreed to a humiliating peace treaty. Two decades later the Third Reich had arisen and was on the march, along the way defeating several previously victorious powers. No serious great power, which China most certainly will be, could docilely accept domination of its region and even border by a potentially hostile nation, whether the U.S. or another. And as America's economic, political, and cultural power fades, Washington will find it ever more difficult to field the kind of military necessary to project its forces and impose its will around the globe.

Which suggests two choices for the U.S. today. The first is to attempt to maintain American dominance irrespective of cost and risk. The second is to accept a future in which influence is shared with China and work to shape that world for the better.

The second path is the best one for the American people, who invariably pay the price of their leaders' follies. Given his willingness to break from foreign policy orthodoxy, Donald Trump could be the president to abandon the expensive quest for evanescent primacy and replace it with a commitment to long-term security. If, in doing so he avoided one or more unnecessary wars with the great nation which is rising in the Far East, he would create a legacy worth remembering.

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