



Washington should not Treat China as the Next Big Enemy

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The end of the Soviet Union left the U.S. without an obvious enemy. While the colorless apparatchiks who came to rule the Soviet Union in the 1960s lacked the evocative evil of Joseph Stalin, the U.S.S.R. was an “Evil Empire,” as President Ronald Reagan termed it.

The Soviet collapse left America alone at the pinnacle of power. That was good for world peace but bad for the Pentagon. Since then much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment has searched for a new threat to justify a military build-up.

Terrorism is America’s most obvious security challenge, but it poses no existential danger to America. Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 some have made Moscow into the reincarnation of the Soviet Union. But Russia remains a pale imitation of the Cold War state, despite rebuilding its military.

Many U.S. hawks see the People’s Republic of China as the Next Big Threat. China has the world’s second largest economy and eventually is likely to take over the top spot. Beijing also is number two in military outlays. Many analysts see the “Beijing model” as an alternative to America’s traditional form of democratic capitalism.

President Donald Trump doesn’t appear to think much about geopolitics. Instead, trade is his primary interest, with China his principal beta noire. Squarely in the “China as enemy” corner was his aide Stephen Bannon, who recently left under fire from a variety of critics. Bannon argued that Beijing is “at economic war with the U.S.” He also predicted that within a decade the U.S. and PRC would come to blows in the South China Sea.

Ironically, in mid-September the Hong Kong brokerage company CLSA, owned by a Chinese state enterprise, invited Bannon in to speak. Some wondered if Beijing hoped to soften his position on the PRC. In his remarks he apparently concentrated on general politics rather than U.S.-China relations.

However, plenty of Chinaphobes remain active in Washington. And the U.S. government will face continuing pressure to treat the PRC as an inevitable adversary.

Yet the Pentagon’s latest report on the Chinese military suggests a relationship where the disagreements, though significant, are not over security essentials. Ultimately the issue is not

protecting America's territory, population, and liberties, but preserving Washington's Asian dominance. The latter may be advantageous, though U.S. policymakers do not always do the right thing. But it's not worth the price of preserving an oversize military, let alone going to war.

In *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017*, the Department of Defense noted that the PRC had improved its capacity to undertake joint operations and fight short conflicts further from the mainland. Moreover, DOD reported that "China has leveraged its growing power to assert its sovereignty claims over features in the East and South China Seas" and "used coercive tactics, such as the use of law enforcement vessel and its maritime militia, to enforce maritime claims and advance its interest in ways that are calculated to fall below the threshold of provoking conflict."

Perhaps most significant, the Pentagon noted that "China's leaders remain focused on developing the capabilities to deter or defeat adversary power projection and counter third-party intervention—including by the United States—during crisis or conflict." That includes limiting America's technological edge.

None of which is surprising or particularly threatening to the U.S.

Of course, Washington would prefer a docile PRC which accepts America's lead. But the young U.S. refused to show Great Britain similar deference. Rising powers rarely agree to remain a vulnerable second.

Nevertheless, America retains a strong lead. Washington begins with much larger military and spends roughly four times as much on the armed services. America has more than six times as many nuclear warheads deployed and more stockpiled. The U.S. possesses ten carrier groups, while the PRC has one rudimentary aircraft carrier. Most important, Beijing has only modest ability to project power, especially to attack the continental U.S. In contrast, the American military has multiple means to strike China.

Finally, Washington augments its power through alliances with most of the world's other industrialized states and backed by multiple bases along the PRC's eastern periphery. China at most calls Pakistan and North Korea allies, both of dubious value, and is surrounded by countries with which it has been at war over the last century: Russia, Korea, India, Japan, and Vietnam. Relations with the latter three remain especially fraught and territorial disputes could turn violent.

In short, in the near- to mid-term, at least, in any normal sense America has little to fear from the PRC. Even if Beijing desired to threaten the American homeland, conquer U.S. territories, or interdict American commerce, it has little ability to do so. What China seeks is to end Washington's dominance along the former's coast, an objective more defensive than offensive.

And economics is on Beijing's side. It is far costlier to project power than deter its use. U.S. policymakers must decide how much of burden they are prepared to force on their own citizens to maintain the overwhelming military superiority necessary to impose Washington's will on China throughout the latter's own region. Such a military is going to grow ever less affordable over time.

The Congressional Budget Office predicts trillion dollar annual deficits within a decade, and rising outlays on entitlements in future years. Americans will have to decide whether they are

prepared to sacrifice domestic needs for defense not of their own nation, but of allied states which underfund their own militaries. China is no replacement as the Evil Empire.

The U.S. and China will inevitably have disagreements. However, they have no vital interests in conflict. Contrary to predictions of Bannon and other fear-mongers, war is not inevitable. Indeed, there is no serious cause for conflict if Washington is willing to accommodate the PRC's rise. The U.S. government's primary duty is to protect Americans' interests, not Washington's influence.

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