

Why US is wrong to see China as next big threat

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US hawks are search for a new enemy to justify military build-up, but this runs counter to America's interests.

The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States alone at the pinnacle of power. That was good for world peace but bad for the Pentagon. Since then, much of the US foreign policy establishment has searched for a new enemy to justify a military build-up.

President Donald Trump does not appear to think much about geopolitics. But there are many hawks in the US who are presenting China as the next big threat.

In its report, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017", the US Department of Defence noted that China had improved its capacity to undertake joint operations and fight short conflicts further from the mainland. Moreover, the report said 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 vessels 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 the US' technological advantage.

None of which is surprising, or particularly threatening to the US. Of course, Washington would prefer a docile China which accepts the US' lead. But rising powers rarely agree to remain a vulnerable second.

Nevertheless, the US has a much larger military and spends roughly four times as much on its armed forces. The US has more than six times as many nuclear warheads deployed and more stockpiled. The US possesses 10 carrier groups, while China has one rudimentary aircraft carrier.

Most important, Beijing has only modest ability to project power, especially to attack the continental US. In contrast, the US military has multiple means to strike China.

Finally, Washington augments its power through alliances with most of the world's other industrialised states and projects it by means of multiple bases along China's eastern periphery.

China is essentially alone and is surrounded by countries with which it has been at war over the last century. Some territorial disputes could turn violent.

In short, in the near- to mid-term at least, in any real sense the US has little to fear from China. Even if Beijing desired to threaten the US homeland, conquer US territories, or interdict US 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. How much is Washington willing to spend to maintain the overwhelming military superiority necessary to impose its will on China throughout the latter's own region? Such a military is going to grow less affordable over time.

The Congressional Budget Office predicts trillion-dollar annual deficits within a decade, and rising outlays on entitlements in future years. Are Americans prepared to sacrifice domestic needs for defence not of their own nation, but of allied states which under-fund their own militaries?

The US and China will inevitably have disagreements. However, they have no vital interests in conflict. Indeed, there is no serious cause for conflict if Washington is willing to accommodate China's rise.

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