

**Doug Bandow**

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Misspent Worry on Chinese Military Spending

U.S. military spending continues to increase even though conventional threats against America are de minimis. China is the leading contender for Enemy Number 1. But if Beijing poses a threat, it is to U.S. domination of East Asia, not America. Only the latter is worth fighting for.

Commonly expressed is fear of growing Chinese military outlays. The Pentagon highlighted its concern with the latest annual report on the PRC's defense budget. Yet Beijing's armed forces remain dwarfed by America's military, which starts at a vastly higher base and spends several times as much.

The Pentagon report states that the U.S. "encourages China to participate responsibly in the international system." True enough, but how does Washington define "responsibly"? One suspects it means accepting American military hegemony in East Asia. With which Beijing isn't likely to agree.

The PRC military build-up so far has been significant but measured. "The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is pursuing comprehensive transformation from a mass army designed for protracted wars of attrition on its periphery against high-tech adversaries," explains the Pentagon. Moreover, China's "armed forces continue to develop and field disruptive military technologies, including those for anti-access/area-denial, as well as for nuclear, space, and cyber warfare, that are changing regional military balances and that have implications beyond the Asia-Pacific region."

Yet this concerted expansion little threatens U.S. security. Only the PRC's nuclear force is theoretically able to strike America today. Beijing possesses about 60 missiles, some of limited range. In contrast, the U.S. nuclear arsenal includes thousands of sophisticated warheads on hundreds of missiles. Beijing is going to have to spend years to build a modest force simply capable of deterring America.

Of course, China intends to move beyond its own shores. The PRC is "developing longer range capabilities that have implications beyond Taiwan," which "could allow China to project power to ensure access to resources or enforce claims to disputed territories," warns the Pentagon.

However, notes DOD, China's military "continues to face deficiencies in inter-service cooperation and actual experience in joint exercises and combat operations." Moreover, Beijing is not yet capable of "defeating a moderate-size adversary." Adds the Pentagon, "China will not be able to project and sustain small military units far beyond China before 2015, and will not be able to project and sustain large forces in combat operations far from China until well into the following decade."

In any case, the PRC has minimal strategic conventional reach. For example, the U.S. possesses 11 carrier groups. China? Zero. Beijing's strategic air capability is insignificant, at best. The country is only able to project power regionally, a fact that should not be ignored.

While East Asian countries may face a greater risk as China's spending rises, defending these nations—which are largely capable of protecting themselves—is not the same as defending the U.S.

China's most obvious objective is to create a military capable of enforcing its will on Taiwan. However, tensions in the Taiwan Strait and DOD admits that "an attempt to invade Taiwan would strain China's untested armed forces and invite international intervention." Taipei also could do significantly more to protect itself.

In fact, Beijing's military build-up is focused on preventing America from attacking China. The Pentagon admits as much without explicitly saying that Beijing is focused on deterring Washington:

"China has or is acquiring the ability to: 1) hold large surface ships, including aircraft carriers, at risk (via quiet submarines, advanced anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), wire-guided and wake-homing torpedoes, or anti-ship ballistic missiles); 2) deny use of shore-based airfields, secure bastions and regional logistics hubs (via conventional ballistic missiles with greater ranges and accuracy, and land attack cruise missiles); and 3) hold aircraft at risk over or near Chinese territory or forces (via imported and domestic fourth generation aircraft, advanced long-range surface-to-air missile systems, air surveillance systems, and ship-borne air defense)."

Who would be sending in "large surface ships" using "shore-based airfields, secure bastions and regional logistics hubs," and deploying aircraft against the PRC? Don't ask.

Washington has vital interests to protect, but not all of its interests are vital. Defending American territory, liberties, and people at home is vital; ensuring dominant American influence half a world away, and discouraging allies from strengthening their own defenses, is not.

And doing the latter at an acceptable cost will grow ever more difficult. By spending a fraction of America's defense budget Beijing is constructing a military able to deter U.S. intervention against China. To overcome this force Washington will have to spend far more, money which it does not have.

With China on the move, DOD observes that "The United States continues to work with our allies and friends in the region to monitor these developments and adjust our policies accordingly." But the resulting policy adjustment should be reducing America's international ambitions rather than

resulting policy adjustment should be reducing America's international ambitions rather than increasing America's military spending. Washington should replace dominance with defense as the core of its foreign policy.

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Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of [Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire](#) (Xulon Press). This article is adapted from an article in [National Interest online](#).
