



## **Cut Away: The U.S. Military Still Deters China**

By Benjamin Friedman

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Pundits, Congressional Republicans, and even allies have lately taken to worrying about U.S. military commitments in Asia. Their concern is that Pentagon budget cuts and distractions in Europe and the Middle-East undermine the U.S.'s ability or willingness to fight. So China might be emboldened to use its growing military for territorial aggression.

Those fears are misplaced. States on the receiving end of deterrent threats historically pay little attention to what the threatening state did elsewhere; they focus on its interests in their conflict and the military balance there. Because the United States and its Asian allies are not close to losing their military advantages over China and have as much reason now to fight as ever, U.S. defense cuts and foreign troubles do not endanger East Asia's stability.

The Obama administration wants to spend \$521 billion on "national defense" in fiscal year 2015, along with a supplemental request of \$79 billion or so. If current spending caps remain the law, U.S. military spending, adjusting for inflation, will fall slightly in 2016, making it about 15 percent lower than 2010, the peak of the recent buildup, and then begin gradually rising. Still, non-war 2016 Pentagon spending would exceed U.S. Cold War averages and amount to roughly three times PLA spending, even adjusting for purchasing power differences. And the United States will devote a much bigger share of its wealth to military power.

Of course, total military spending reveals little about how combat between states would go. That depends mainly on the geography of combat and capabilities of the forces that can deploy to the fight. Those considerations show why the United States and its Asian allies will contain China for the foreseeable future. While a comprehensive review of the U.S.-China balance of power is impossible here, several points are revealing.

First, in the most likely war scenarios, the United States and an ally would be defending a coastline or island. Defending is easier than attacking, especially against invaders coming from the sea, as Chinese forces attacking Japan, defended islands, or Taiwan must. Dug-in forces on shore can withstand air attack and brutalize the ships or aircraft carrying landing forces.

Second, any U.S.-China war would occur in domains of relative U.S. strength: the air, the sea, and even space. Even if China manages to deploy ballistic or cruise missiles capable of hitting moving U.S. ships, the missiles' accuracy will depend on the radars that are vulnerable to jamming or direct attack. China has little prospect of gaining the ability to track and kill U.S. submarines, which can wreck havoc on the PLA Navy. And in the South China Sea, Chinese fighter aircraft would exceed ranges where airborne warning and control aircraft could cue them, unlike their U.S. rivals.

Inexperience and institutional deficiencies slow China's ability to close those gaps, whatever it's spending. Breathless reports notwithstanding, the Chinese defense industry still struggles to make stealth aircraft and precision-guided missiles. The PLA is still learning to operate its sole aircraft carrier and to keep ballistic submarines at sea. The PLA lacks combat experience and suffers from graft; officer's promotions and procurement awards often require kickbacks.

Certainly the Pentagon has its own acquisition problems, which is one reason why the Navy and Air Force have shrunk over decades in terms of ships and aircraft. But, at the same time, gains in accuracy, surveillance capability and communications systems have made each platform more deadly and the whole force more capable. Today the Pentagon is attempting to preserve these relative strengths. Planned cuts focus on personnel spending, while procurement and operational accounts do relatively well over the next five years.

Third, limits on U.S. force availability are often overstated. Hawks claim that global responsibilities would leave only a portion of the U.S. military available for China. But war is unlikely to erupt without crisis that allows the United States to move forces to the region, especially the aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, and fighter aircraft most relevant to Pacific combat. And the war would be important enough to merit lessening forces elsewhere. China, meanwhile, has its own competing military concerns, such as India.

Fourth, U.S. nuclear weapons go far to deter China. Even if Chinese leaders doubt that the United States would risk nuclear war for an ally, the consequences of being wrong about that quell aggression. And Chinese leaders still cannot be sure that their nuclear arsenal can survive a U.S. first strike.

Finally, there is little reason to assume China will become more aggressive. Economic and demographic trends militate against China sustaining its rate of military spending. And fear of major war, even a conventional one with a state like Japan, tempers China's territorial ambitions. In that, China follows other historically big powers, including the Soviet Union.

Washington's foreign policy elites have narcissistic take on deterrence; they see it teetering with every foreign policy decision that troubles them. But East Asia's stability remains robust—insensitive to the annual fights in Congress—because war remains a losing prospect for all major powers.

Still, Washington's misconceptions about its credibility may have an ironic virtue. If allies take U.S. commentary about insufficient pivots and failed red lines too seriously, they may worry enough to pay more for their own defense and give U.S. taxpayers a break. Letting them sweat a bit is in the U.S. interest.

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