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CON: A naval race with China is unnecessary and will likely backfire

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WASHINGTON — Policymakers increasingly perceive China's growing naval strength in Asia as an acute threat to American interests that must be met with a corresponding surge in U.S. naval power in the Pacific.

However, precisely what tangible threat a few more Chinese frigates on the other side of the planet poses to U.S. national security interests is rather difficult to identify. And exactly what objective is supposed to be achieved by boosting the U.S. Navy's presence in the region is something of a mystery.

Hawks point to Chinese territorial claims and naval activity in the South China Sea as a signal of Beijing's growing ability to undermine freedom of navigation. But capability does not equal intent. Indeed, any interruption in commercial shipping in the Pacific would be devastating for China's own economic and security interests.

China is the largest trading nation in the world and relies on the South China Sea for almost 40 percent of all its trade, valued at roughly \$1.5 trillion per year. If anything, Beijing's more assertive posture suggests a determination not to close off vital sea lanes, but to keep them open.

It is notable, in addition, that the United States perceives a grave threat from China's naval expansion that China's own neighbors seem to miss.

Average defense spending as a percentage of GDP among the 11 East Asian states along China's periphery has declined by almost half over the past 30 years. Moreover, none of them have engaged in their own freedom of navigation operations to directly challenge China, despite encouragement to do so from Washington.

The Philippines had a major dispute with China over maritime and territorial claims, which led to multiple naval standoffs, but now Manila appears to be buddying up to Beijing, not balancing against it. If China's own proximate rivals don't see a major threat, why should we?

Even stipulating that Chinese naval power is a problem, one is still left to wonder what effect beefing up the U.S. Pacific Fleet is expected to have on Beijing's calculations.

Are we to believe Beijing will respond to a proliferation of U.S. warships off its shore by slashing its naval budget, decommissioning scores of ships, and eagerly forfeiting its regional ambitions?

There is a glaring logical contradiction in depicting China as a nascent peer competitor doggedly seeking to supplant America as the global juggernaut by whatever means necessary, but which will abruptly cower in response to a mild U.S. naval buildup in the Pacific Ocean.

More likely, cranking up a Sino-American naval competition will generate heightened fear and suspicion in Beijing.

Combined with President Trump's threat of a trade war and his pugnacious foreign policy rhetoric, that is a recipe for inducing a more aggressive Chinese posture and locking the 21st century's two major powers into a new cold war.

The truth is that China's naval expansion threatens not so much America's security, but its prestige. China's rise is a symbolic threat to America's status as the world's sole superpower, the indispensable nation. We would be well advised to curb such pretensions.

China is most interested in continued economic growth and in gaining international status, respect, and recognition. It is far better to accommodate such benign objectives than to inflate the threat from China and ignite a bitter great power rivalry that neither country can win.

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