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Can America Contain a Power It Is Simultaneously Helping to Rise?

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| January 5, 2011

| [Justin Logan](#)^[2]

Daniel Twining of the German Marshall Fund has a [post](#)^[3] up at *Foreign Policy* magazine that touches on an issue that has vexed me for some time now. In the post, Twining advises the Obama administration to “sustain U.S. primacy in Asia in the face of China’s challenge” and simultaneously to “invest in the rise of key countervailing Asian powers that can contribute public goods of stability and security.”

I find this perplexing. The largest contributors to China’s growing military power are its [economic growth](#)^[4] and its desire to establish in East Asia something resembling what the United States has in the Western Hemisphere. In turn, one of the largest factors fueling Chinese economic growth is access to Western markets via trade, including trade with the United States. Generally speaking, international trade benefits poorer countries relatively more than it does wealthier countries, in part because of the relatively larger differences between domestic prices and world prices. In short, our trade policies are helping narrow the gap between the American economy and the Chinese economy—and with it, the gap between American and Chinese military capabilities. How much you are concerned about growing Chinese military power seems like it ought to bear on your position on the economic relationship with China. But for almost all the Washington China-policy establishment, trade with China is good but Chinese military power is bad. [This seems incoherent](#)^[5]. The former enables—and comes close to ensuring—the latter.

Secondly, Twining’s proposals contradict each other. If the United States follows Twining’s advice and works at “diversifying U.S. military-access and basing rights beyond Japan and Korea, deepening missile defense collaboration with these and other countries (including Taiwan), building up naval power in the Pacific and Indian oceans, and investing in next-generation technologies to counteract asymmetric Chinese weapons systems,” then there’s every reason to believe that other countries in the region will continue to free-ride on Uncle Sucker, not willingly take up their fair share of the burden. That isn’t because Japan, India, or Russia are wicked—it’s because they’re smart. If a wealthy person down the block makes clear that he equates his own safety with yours, and demonstrates over 60 years a willingness to pay for your home security system while gently suggesting every so often that you might want to

chip in some time, wouldn't you be smart to let him continue paying? This logic was laid out by Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser over 40 years ago [6], and largely confirmed by John Oneal almost 20 years ago [7].

If Washington has produced a satisfactory defense of our paradoxical China policy, I haven't heard it.

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