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## The China Syndrome

by Doug Bandow

10.19.2009

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When President Barack Obama visits the People's Republic of China (PRC) next month, he hopes to expand the military relationship between the two nations. The PRC recently celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, marking the amazing transformation of a once impoverished agrarian society which is fast becoming an industrial giant. But it is not economics that most worries many U.S. policy makers. It is military security.

For most of the twentieth century, China was an international nullity. The sordid remains of a once proud imperial court were pushed overboard by a nationalist revolution, but the result was divided warlord rule rather than a modern democratic state. Decades of conflict ensued among the murderous Japanese invaders, incompetent and corrupt nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek, and brutal Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadres, headed by Mao Zedong. The new regime's international influence was limited. Mao's bizarre economic theories and bitter political feuds convulsed party, state, and people. Once Beijing fell out with the Soviet Union, China's foreign reach shrank even further.

But the PRC's potential remained. The nation possessed the world's largest population and its people were entrepreneurial successes around the world. China boasted an ancient and proud civilization which once had dominated East Asia. All that was necessary was to release China's people from the strictures of totalitarian communism. Mao's death more than thirty years ago began that process.

Today the PRC is a dramatically different country. Hundreds of millions of people have moved out of immiserating poverty. Private businesses have proliferated. An independent sector has arisen. Although the authorities maintain the CCP's political monopoly, other aspects of the once totalitarian system have weakened: even religious liberty has expanded, despite continuing persecution.

But Beijing's growth poses a significant challenge. The economic benefits of China's integration into the international trading system have been enormous. However, the PRC is presenting an alternative authoritarian model rather than joining the democratic West. And Beijing increasingly is asserting itself—and building a military to match.

The Pentagon annually issues a report on Chinese military outlays. Although the Department of Defense has eschewed alarmism, its latest

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publication noted: "much uncertainty surrounds China's future course, particularly regarding how its expanding military power might be used." The latest National Intelligence Strategy warned that China's "increasing natural resource-focused diplomacy and military modernization are among the facts making it a complex challenge."

Yet however impressive the PRC's recent military parade—involving 8,000 personnel and 151 planes—Beijing remains far behind the United States. Washington starts at a much higher base. The American armed forces are the most capable on earth. U.S. ground forces are better trained, equipped, and prepared than those of China.

Washington's nuclear arsenal is far larger and more sophisticated. U.S. air power is without peer. America possesses eleven carrier groups compared to none for Beijing.

Nor will it be easy for China to catch up. Especially since PRC military outlays remain far behind those of America. U.S. defense spending in 2009 (the fiscal year ended September 30) ran roughly \$700 billion. That's about seven times estimated Chinese expenditures. Subtract war outlays and the U.S. government still devotes roughly five times as much to the military as does Beijing. Even if the latter accelerates its military modernization, it will take years if not decades to match America's outlays, let alone move into the lead.

Thus, to talk about China as a security threat in the near- to mid-term verges on the bizarre. That doesn't mean Beijing poses no challenge to the U.S. government. The PRC will soon threaten American domination of East Asia.

The real issue is America's ability to attack the PRC. Observes former-Pentagon official Chas Freeman, the Chinese "have no intentions of fighting a war in the United States, but we have done a lot of planning about fighting them on their territory."

But possessing the ability to attack China at will is not the same as the ability to defend America against all comers. The latter is the military's central mission. The former is convenient, not essential, and mostly benefits America's friends and allies rather than America. As Washington's post-Cold War dominance ebbs, it will be much harder for the United States to intervene on behalf of other nations.

Today America's security guarantees appear to offer a free lunch. Washington need merely threaten to go to war, and any potential adversary is expected to back off. But China is creating a military that can deter U.S. intervention.

Beijing doesn't have to be able to defeat America. The former doesn't even have to match the U.S. military. China merely need create sufficient risk to prevent Washington from using its superior forces. There has, for instance, been near hysteria in some circles about the possibility that Beijing might equip one carrier. Notes Peter Singer of the Brookings Institution: "the military dynamic in the Pacific is changing. But it is not because the Chinese may one day gain a small number of their own, far-worse aircraft carriers. It is what they are planning to do to overcome our own aircraft carriers and other traditional strengths."

To forestall American intervention, the PRC is developing nuclear force sufficient to prevent Washington from attempting nuclear coercion, an arsenal of missiles and subs to sink U.S. carriers, and asymmetrical warfare capabilities to blind American satellites and fry American electronic systems. The ultimate result, in the words of Daniel



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Blumenthal of the American Enterprise Institute, will be to raise “the costs to us of accessing the region to defend our allies and help keep the peace.”

That price already is rising. For instance, Reuters reports: “American naval strategists are concerned that China may have developed an anti-ship ballistic missile, a Dongfeng 21-D, that could force U.S. aircraft carriers to keep their distance in the event of an attack on self-ruled Taiwan.” Similarly, notes the Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair, “China is very aggressive in the cyber-world.” To acquire these capabilities Beijing need spend far less than Washington will have to spend to overcome China’s growing capabilities.

But a U.S. retreat need not leave America’s friends helpless. Rather, they should do much more on their own behalf. For instance, though current bilateral relations have been improving, Taiwan is the most likely target of an attempt at Chinese coercion. But Taipei need not sit naked next to its big neighbor. Taiwanese Prime Minister Wu Den-yih recently observed: “Taiwan needs to ensure it has strong defense (against China), so it is necessary to continue to procure weapons to achieve that goal.” The United States should fulfill its promises to sell Taiwan the necessary weapons.

Japan, with an economy that remains larger (on an exchange rate basis, at least) than that of the PRC, could do far more. In recent years Tokyo has been adopting a tougher stance towards Beijing. With a new party taking power, the Japanese government has a unique opportunity to reconsider Japanese foreign policy. The Democratic Party of Japan appears inclined to tilt more towards the PRC, but a shift in U.S. policy might change the DPJ’s attitude. Paul Giarra and Michael Green, of the group Global Strategies & Transformation and the Center for Strategic and International Relations, respectively, recently observed: “U.S. officials will have to lay out constructive thinking in Tokyo about how to add more capability in the U.S.-Japan alliance. The U.S. should have serious talks with its allies about gaps in strategic defenses caused by the Chinese military’s build-up.”

But these negotiations should emphasize devolution. The U.S. should suggest that Tokyo consider its options in a world in which Washington no longer maintains bases, troops, and fleets on station to fight for the security of prosperous, populous nations that have grown used to being subsidized and protected by America.

So, too, South Korea. The Republic of Korea (ROK) enjoys about forty times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea. As the ROK looks beyond the Korean peninsula, it should work with Japan and the ASEAN states to create an environment which encourages the PRC to rise peacefully, as Beijing has promised. Historically China has been cautiously assertive, not recklessly aggressive. The better armed and more willing to cooperate with their neighbors, the more likely America’s friends will be to deter conflict—without relying on the U.S.

The outcome of the twenty-first century depends much on the nature of the relationship between the globe’s superpower, the United States, and the globe’s likely next superpower, China. America’s rise transformed the international order without causing world conflict, while Germany’s ascent triggered two global conflagrations. Will the existing international order—and particularly the United States—successfully accommodate the PRC’s growing influence?

Washington has vital interests to protect, but not all of its interests are vital. Defending American territory, liberties and people at home is essential; ensuring dominant American influence half a world away is

not. And doing the latter at 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. It is one thing to ask the American people to sacrifice to defend their own nation. It is quite another to demand ever higher financial exactions to protect populous and prosperous allied states. Especially since an increasingly wealthy and influential China is unlikely to retreat gracefully and accept perpetual U.S. hegemony.

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 to reduce America's international ambitions rather than increase America's military spending. Even as President Obama seeks to improve Washington's relations with the PRC, the United States should replace dominance with defense as the core of its foreign policy.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire* (Xulon Press).

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