

FOREIGN POLICY

Home » Foreign Policy »

Replace Schizophrenia with Peace as Washington's China Policy

Doug Bandow

December 21, 2011

Foreign Policy

As the European Union grapples with economic crisis, Brussels cast its eyes eastward for help. Would the People's Republic of China be so kind as to bail out the spendthrift European nations? At the same time, the U.S., tied to Europe through the NATO alliance, shifted towards a policy of soft containment. Washington did not bother to disguise its objectives as it promoted alliances throughout East Asia and added military forces to Australia.

The confused policy of "conengagement," mixing containment and engagement, has increasingly characterized the U.S. approach to China. Americans want the benefit of trade and support for international initiatives, but fear a wealthier and more assertive Beijing pursuing its own interests. The result is more than Washington's usual incoherence.

Disagreements among otherwise friendly states are not uncommon—just look at the U.S. and Europeans. However, the trans-Atlantic relationship is rooted in cooperation. There is no military competition, no troop deployments linked to European foreign policy, no Pentagon reports on Europe's threatening military.

Washington's view of PRC security policy and military developments is very different. The Department of Defense publishes an annual report on the Chinese military, the very existence of which implies that China is a potential threat. And the report is casually waved as evidence of the need for America to maintain its extraordinary military outlays—roughly as much as the rest of the world combined.

But not just continued spending on personnel and weapons. Also the deployment of those forces far from America and close to China, like in Australia. Over the years the U.S. has perceived other potential enemies in Asia—Japan, North Korea, and Russia—and developed alliances accordingly. Now the first is a close ally, the second is an impoverished wreck, and the third poses no threat and is focused westward. Maintaining, indeed strengthening, existing alliances today has only one purpose, to contain the PRC.

Of course, U.S. policymakers spend much effort denying the obvious, that America is preparing for potential war with China. But such assurances cannot be taken seriously. Observed Sun Zhe of Tsinghua University, "If you say [America's aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines] are only targeting North Korea, nobody will believe it." Of course, conflict is not Washington's objective. The hope is that America's military power will continue to overawe Beijing. However, that means U.S. administrations are devoting much effort and resources to preserving American military superiority and limiting potential Chinese activity.

That's a plausible strategy for a nation with a vast technological and economic edge. But Washington is attempting to maintain a de facto empire on borrowed money while its creditors are at its door. With a \$15 trillion national debt and roughly \$200 trillion in other obligations and unfunded liabilities, the U.S. government will find it nearly impossible to continue playing global policeman.

The bigger problem, however, is the reaction that Washington's policy causes in Beijing. What Americans view as selflessly defending friends and maintaining the global commons Chinese view as selfishly promoting U.S. interests and threatening their homeland. The obvious response, a military build-up, is precisely what is detailed in the Pentagon report, the Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011.

Documented is a slowly changing balance of power. For instance, the Pentagon concluded that "China's modernized military could be put to use in ways that increase China's ability to gain diplomatic advantage or resolve disputes in its favor." This is undoubtedly true. But so what? Washington uses its dominant military in precisely this way virtually every week, if not more often.

Moreover, reported DoD, Beijing is developing "anti-access/area denial" capabilities: While they "were developed with a focus on Taiwan, they have broad applications and implications extending beyond a Taiwan scenario." Yet the U.S. military does the same thing not just every week but every day. In fact, there is nothing more vital for America than denying a hostile power access to U.S. airspace, coastal waters, and other areas of critical security interest.

Missing from the Pentagon report is any mention of China's ability to conquer Hawaii and Alaska, bombard the West

Latest Articles

[Preparing for Uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula](#)

[Replace Schizophrenia with Peace as Washington's China Policy](#)

[Keeping the Impending Deployment of American Marines to Australia in Proper Perspective](#)

[The Limp in China's Great Leap](#)

[Anla Cheng on Upcoming Changes in China's Top Financial Regulatory Posts](#)

Most Read Articles

[The Mathematics of Military Balance Has the U.S. Debt Crisis Made China the World's Most Responsible Economic Power?](#)

[In the City, but Not of the City: the Myth of China's Urbanization](#)

[China's High-Speed Trains: Too Fast, Too Furious](#)

[What Influence does China have in BRICS?](#)

search

[Government Resources](#)

[Think Tank Resources](#)

[Other Resources](#)

Coast, and demand America's surrender on pain of nuclear annihilation. Beijing is not threatening the U.S. Nothing the PRC is doing undermines the defense of America. The issue is Washington's ability to project force along China's border and enforce its will on China.

But you wouldn't know this from listening to the administration. President Barack Obama affirmed that "the United States is a Pacific power" and that "Reductions in U.S. defense spending will not—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia Pacific." Indeed, the White House touted "an expanded security presence" in the region even though the administration's Australia gambit is more symbolic than real.

No doubt possessing such power offers obvious advantages for the U.S. The PRC's future development is uncertain and its neighbors are nervous. However, in Asia (in contrast to North America) America's interest in overpowering China will never match China's interest in not being overpowered. Which means Beijing will always have a greater incentive to do what is necessary to deter the U.S. than the U.S. will have to do what is necessary to intervene. Trying to contain the PRC inevitably will generate an even stronger determination not to be controlled.

And the cost differential will continue to favor Beijing. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that China's "investments in cyber and anti-satellite warfare, anti-air and anti-ship weaponry, and ballistic missiles could threaten America's primary way to project power and help allies in the Pacific—and in particular our forward air bases and carrier strike groups." But it is much cheaper for the PRC to threaten them than it is for Washington to protect them or, even worse, replace them if destroyed.

One need not treat the American and Chinese governments as morally equivalent to recognize that China has legitimate security concerns. Even granting the inevitable exaggeration, Xinhua points to a difficult history: "From the Opium War in 1840 to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China suffered more than 470 offenses and invasions that came from the seas." In recent decades Beijing has been at war with America, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and Vietnam.

Today the PRC's ocean trade occurs at Washington's sufferance even as some Americans talk about the possibility of war. The administration's plan to augment America's permanent presence in Australia cannot be seen but as threatening. Chinese Defense Minister Geng Yansheng opined: "We believe this is all a manifestation of a Cold War mentality."

As for U.S. complaints about Beijing's military outlays, Xinhua made the not unreasonable observation: "For many in China, it is weird that the Pentagon, whose expenditures reached nearly \$700 billion and accounted for over an appalling 40 percent of the world's total in 2010, routinely points its finger at China." Frankly, it is weird.

Washington's approach to China needs to change. America's overriding objective should be to avoid military conflict with the PRC. The character of the 21st century will vary dramatically depending on whether the existing superpower and the likely next superpower establish a cooperative or confrontational relationship. Imagine a 20th century if dominant Great Britain had reached a *modus vivendi* with Germany as the former did with America.

This doesn't mean the U.S. has no important interests to protect and valued friends to support. It does mean Washington should carefully weigh interests and make trade-offs. Not everything is vital and few things are worth war or the threat of war.

Second, the U.S. should be willing to step back and stop trying to micro-manage events and resolve controversies half a world away. As China found out last year, arrogance and sharp elbows do not win friends. Beijing's truculence caused several nations in East Asia to take notice, doing far more damage to its own cause than Washington ever could do.

Indeed, while the U.S. and PRC both may seek to be Asia's dominant power, the region is becoming a multi-polar, beyond any one nation's control. India is following China along the potential superpower path and will become an ever more important player—and one likely determined to restrain Beijing. And there is everyone else.

Roger Kaplan of the Center for a New American Security observed: "India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia are acquiring submarines, as advances in missile technology make surface warships more vulnerable. Australia, with a population of only 23 million, is expected to spend a whopping \$279 billion in the next two decades on new subs, destroyers and fighter planes. In all, given military modernization programs under way in South Korea and Japan, Asian nations are expected to purchase as many as 111 submarines by 2030."

All of these countries are arming in response to the PRC's rise. While none alone could defeat China in a war, collectively they will constrain Beijing's behavior. Just the Chinese hope to deter America, the Chinese can be deterred by others.

The result may be a more uncertain and volatile world, but it cannot be wished away by the U.S. And America's best response is to diminish its ambitions over time. For example, peaceful resolution of competing territorial claims in the South China Sea understandably interests Washington. In fact, contrary to common assumptions, Beijing has settled most territorial claims over the years and on reasonable terms. Even if not, however, the U.S. hardly can claim a role in deciding who owns what simply based on its claim to be a maritime and trading nation. After all, America would react badly if the PRC claimed the right to officiate between U.S. and Cuban maritime claims based on Beijing's global economic interests.

Third, China's future is highly uncertain. It is likely to become a wealthy superpower, but it is far from one today. Most Chinese remain poor farmers, barely removed from lives of unavailing hardship. The PRC's dramatic economic growth has left equally dramatic income inequality, official corruption, and social dissatisfaction in its wake. Beijing faces extraordinary economic, social, and political challenges, without the release valve of democracy.

Thus, any serious military threat to America, as opposed to American military dominance of China, will be years, if not decades in the making. The U.S. will have plenty of time to respond if the worst occurs. Indeed, Washington will be better

able to prepare for the future by not weakening the American economy today by maintaining a burdensome, oversized military. The Congressional Budget Office has called America's fiscal prospects "daunting." Unless Washington changes course, the U.S. will face an extraordinary debt burden—worse than that now borne by Greece—precisely when as it watches the PRC race ahead with the world's largest economy.

Fourth, Beijing has much at stake in a peaceful and prosperous global order. The end of turmoil at home and conflict abroad enabled China to embark upon its extraordinary economic transformation. Prosperity obviously has provided Beijing with the resources necessary to create a modern military. Prosperity also acts as the principal source of legitimacy for an unelected government.

Thus, Beijing has a powerful incentive to continue implementing policies which spur economic growth—which means peace. Should the good times end, political instability would follow. While nationalism sometimes trumps good sense, reformist China so far has generally elevated pragmatism above ideology. It is likely to do so in the future, at least unless it perceives its own security to be threatened by an attempt at military encirclement, ala Wilhelmine Germany before World War I.



Instead, the U.S. and China's neighbors should encourage the PRC to take a leadership role in an international order which has yielded so much benefit. In effect, China needs to begin producing as well as consuming "peace, stability and free trade," in Fareed Zakaria's words. But this also means Washington being open to changes in international institutions, since Beijing cannot be expected to automatically accept organizations and processes created by the West for the West's benefit. The U.S. and its friends should make the PRC a genuine partner in return for a commitment of peaceful participation.

China's entry onto the international stage is bound to be disruptive, but it still can be peaceful. Maintenance of peace is the shared responsibility of the PRC and those nations adjusting to its rise, most obviously the U.S. Instead of attempting to maintain its unsustainable dominance in East Asia, Washington should begin stepping back, allowing countries in the region to take the lead in sorting out their own destiny.

That may result in a more uncertain future. But it also is more likely to be a peaceful future. And that is in everyone's interest.

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)

BackTags: Asia-Pacific, China-US relations

 Print  Email this article

Related Articles

Strategic Shifts in China-US Relations Presage Challenges Ahead

12/20/2011 George Koo

Obama in Australia: Balancing not Containment

12/16/2011 Rory Medcalf

Detaching Taiwan from US China Policy Is Self-Deceptive

12/16/2011 Xu Shiquan

The U.S. Factor in Sino-Latin American Relations

11/03/2011 Jiang Shixue

[HOME](#)

[FOREIGN
POLICY](#)

[FINANCE &
ECONOMY](#)

[ENERGY &
ENVIRONMENT](#)

[PEACE &
SECURITY](#)

[POLITICAL &
SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT](#)

[CULTURE &
HISTORY](#)

[ABOUT US](#)

[CONTACT US](#)

[SUBSCRIBE TO](#)

