

No Need for Washington to Panic in Confronting a More Powerful China

By: Doug Bandow – June 7, 2013

According to today's conventional wisdom, the U.S. and China are converging, with Beijing set to surpass America as the globe's most powerful nation. But America's advantages remain overwhelming. The People's Republic of China may eventually be number one, but not for many years to come.

The U.S. Department of Defense recently published its latest report on Chinese military developments. The PRC, said the Pentagon, "continues to pursue a long-term, comprehensive military modernization program designed to improve the capacity of its armed forces to fight and win short-duration, high-intensity regional military conflict."

Nevertheless, argued Andrew Erickson of the U.S. Naval War College and Adam Liff of Princeton: "China's civilian leaders clearly see military modernization as a priority that is secondary to overall economic development. Over the past two decades, China's defense budget increases have been roughly consistent with GDP growth and actually have been outpaced by the even more rapid increase of overall government expenditures."

Of course, Beijing's advances are real. DOD points to missiles: China "is developing and testing several new classes and variants of offensive missiles, forming additional missile units, upgrading older missile systems, and developing methods to counter ballistic missile defenses."

Beijing also is adding anti-ship missiles, which give the People's Liberation Army "the capability to attack large ships, including aircraft carriers, in the Western Pacific Ocean. In addition, the PRC is modernizing its strategic forces, creating longer-range and more survivable missiles.

Moreover, the PLA Navy is expanding. It has, explained the Pentagon, "the largest force of major combatants, submarines, and amphibious warfare ships in Asia." Last year the PLAN commissioned the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier (a refurbished Soviet cast-off), Beijing's first, which successfully launched its first fighter. An operational air wing is likely within two years; China is expected to construct its own carriers during the coming decade.

The navy also "places a high priority on the modernization of its submarine force," from nuclear-powered ballistic missile to diesel-powered attack subs. Moreover, reported DOD, "Since 2008, the PLA Navy has embarked on a robust surface combatant construction program."

Although the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) remains largely reliant on older generation fighters, the Pentagon pointed out that "China continues to field increasingly modern 4th generation aircraft." Beijing has deployed a second stealth fighter prototype, is upgrading its bomber fleet, and "possesses one of the largest forces of advanced SAM systems in the world."

The PLA's ground forces are being modernized with an emphasis on "the ability to deploy campaign-level forces across long distances quickly." The country also is expanding "its space-based intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, navigation, meteorological, and communications satellite constellations."

It's an impressive program. However, it poses little threat to America.

At issue are both intentions and capabilities. Beijing's ambitions have been expanding, but the U.S. benefits from some of them. Noted the Pentagon: "China's military continues to emphasize military Operations other than War (MOOTW) including emergency response, counter-terrorism, international rescue, disaster relief, peacekeeping, and various other security tasks."

Nevertheless, noted the Pentagon, China's "military modernization has also become increasingly focused on investments in military capabilities to conduct a wider range of missions beyond its immediate territorial concerns." Still, "Preparing for potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait appears to remain the principal focus and primary driver of China's military investment."

The latter conflicts with Washington's objectives but does not threaten U.S. security. The PRC has no interest in war with America or any design to threaten U.S. territory, population, or prosperity. Rather, China envisions a world in which it has greater influence and America has less.

While this world may not be a better place—certainly from Washington's viewpoint—it will inevitably arrive. The U.S. should not view Beijing's challenge as primarily military, which must be resisted with force.

Equally important is the question of capabilities. China is the world's number two in military spending—DOD estimates the equivalent of between \$135 billion and \$215 billion. But America's advantage remains huge. Washington possesses the world's biggest and most powerful military and continues to spend far more than the PRC, three or more times on the U.S. "core," non-war budget.

Noted Erickson and Liff: "While investments in military modernization over the past decade mean that China is increasingly fielding formidable military capabilities in its immediate periphery, this is a far cry from developing a global force similar to that of America's military, which is capable of high-intensity modern warfare anywhere in the world." The PLA is in no position to challenge U.S. control over its own territory. Washington's power will be sufficient to deter China even if the latter mounts an unprecedented military build-up for years or decades to come.

The real "threat" from the PRC today is to build up a force capable of preventing the U.S. from intervening in East Asia. As DOD put it, "China continues to develop measures to deter or counter third-party intervention."

There is nothing nefarious about Beijing developing what the Pentagon refers to as "anti-access" and "area denial" capabilities. Washington would do the same if Chinese ships were patrolling the Gulf of Mexico while officials in Beijing were debating the possibility of war with the U.S.

The thought of being constrained internationally shocks Washington policymakers who have come to view global hegemony as America's birthright. However, U.S. dominance is artificial and temporary. Even if the U.S. was not effectively bankrupt, it would be hard to spend enough to overcome China's growing deterrent capabilities.

The PRC doesn't need 11 carrier groups to confront America. Beijing needs only build submarines and missiles capable of sinking America's 11 carrier groups. As Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense David Helvey noted with great understatement: "Obviously, something that can hold at risk large surface ships, including aircraft carriers, is something we pay attention to." The administration's much ballyhooed "pivot" to Asia cannot change this reality.

Washington's present dominance most benefits allied states, such as Taiwan, since the U.S. does not need to be able to defeat China along China's border to protect America. In fact, American

defense subsidies have discouraged U.S. friends from doing more for their own defense. For instance, Tokyo recently announced a 0.8 percent hike in military outlays for 2013, the first increase in 11 years. Even Taiwan, facing the greatest threat, spends relatively little.

Ultimately, the U.S. cannot complain about the PRC's "rise." The U.S. "rose" during the 19th and 20th centuries, supplanting Great Britain as the globe's premier power. Washington also superseded France, Germany, and Russia/Soviet Union, which all at one time or another pretended to global leadership if not dominance.

In any case, Chinese military outlays are not likely to ebb absent an economic catastrophe. The PRC has extensive commercial and energy interests around the globe. Beijing also is determined to banish forever a history notable for humiliation of a great empire by Western powers.

The U.S. and China can ease tensions through increased budget transparency and bilateral exchanges. More important, the two nations need to find an accommodation between the global superpower with Asian interests and the rising Asian power. Differences are inevitable, but Beijing and Washington should firmly commit themselves to solving disagreements peacefully and avoiding military confrontations.