



The Campaign For Liberty promotes and defends the great American principles of individual liberty, constitutional government, sound money, free markets, and a non-interventionist foreign policy, by means of educational and political activity.

Visit us on the Web at www.CampaignForLiberty.com

What to Do with China?

By Doug Bandow

01/26/2010



Doug Bandow is the Robert A. Taft Fellow at the American Conservative Defense Alliance (www.acdalliance.org) and 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, 2006).

The U.S. is the world's dominant power. Nevertheless, some Americans see China as a serious security threat. They want to use Beijing as a justification for raising the military budget even further.

It's a foolish policy that could end up getting the U.S. into an unnecessary war.

Earlier this year Adm. Robert F. Willard, head of the U.S. Pacific Command, testified that China's military build-up was "aggressive" and appeared to be "designed to challenge U.S. freedom of action in the region." It was a dramatic example of chutzpah of the sort routinely engaged in by Washington officials.

Look around the world. The U.S. accounts for almost half of the world's military outlays. America spends several times as much as Beijing on the military. The U.S. is the only nation which has global reach. Washington has scattered hundreds of thousands of troops on hundreds of installations worldwide. Many are deployed along China's border. Washington is the most important participant in every leading military alliance from Asia to Europe. Occupation forces remain on station in Iraq. Washington is expanding the war in Afghanistan. Only American officials circle the globe telling other peoples how to run their countries.

When Adm. Willard talks about preserving America's "freedom of action in the region," he means maintaining Washington's ability to attack the People's Republic of China. Whether it is good for the U.S. government to possess such power is not clear. "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," famously warned Lord Acton. He didn't exempt America from the operation of his aphorism. However, whether it's good or not doesn't matter. Washington's dominance is going to fade. With a \$12 trillion national debt, annual deficits exceeding \$1 trillion, and \$107 trillion in unfunded liabilities, Washington cannot afford to forever spend as much as the rest of the world on the military. Especially when defense is so much cheaper than offense. No country has an ability to harm the U.S. other than Russia and China, which possess (smaller and much smaller, respectively) arsenals of nuclear-tipped ICBM's. Terrorists also are a threat, but aren't in the same category as nuclear war.

Washington's ability to attack other nations requires not just ICBM's, but also air wings, carrier groups, armored divisions, and more. Lots of them. Enough of them to overwhelm the defenders. The PRC isn't busy building carrier groups -- one carrier appears to be on the drawing board, but the current America-China balance is eleven-zero. Instead, Beijing is acquiring missiles and submarines which can sink American carriers. The PRC also is developing anti-satellite weapons and other asymmetric warfare capabilities. These weapons aren't cheap, but they are a lot cheaper than what the U.S. is buying and doing. Even today, war with Beijing would be a nightmare. A conflict with nuclear-armed China would be very different than America's other recent military opponents: Afghanistan, Grenada, Haiti, Iraq (twice), Panama, and Serbia. In a few years such a war would be indescribably worse.

But there's another reason to avoid conflict with China. This fantastic and fascinating nation of 1.3 billion people has the potential to become a free society. Many barriers remain to such a transformation. The government in Beijing is authoritarian, recently tightening internet censorship and imprisoning human rights activists. Social unrest, ethnic division, and financial overextension all could lead to crisis. Nationalism is a very powerful impulse, even among the modernizing young. Democracy may be very long in coming. Yet it is impossible to visit the PRC without feeling respect for the present and hope for the future. China has come far fast. Part of that obviously is economic.

The PRC remains poor -- estimates of its per capita income run between \$3200 and \$3300 annually, putting it around 100 out of nearly 200 nations. (Purchasing power parity yields about \$6000, though China's relative ranking remains about the same.) Nevertheless, economic growth has been dramatic, and over the last three decades hundreds of millions of people have escaped immiserating poverty. That is an enormous moral good. If the PRC continues on its present course, prosperity will spread to more and more people. Throughout most of China's history, life has been, in the words of philosopher Thomas Hobbes, "poor, nasty, brutish, and short." For Chinese today that is finally changing. Moreover, the PRC has become much freer in recent decades. Not free, of course. But compare China today to Mao Zedong's China. For instance, the Cultural Revolution was a time of political madness, in which Mao triggered a xenophobic near-civil war. Tens of millions of people died during Mao's rule.

Today, the Chinese people increasingly enjoy the sort of personal autonomy that Americans have come to expect. The economy is increasingly private; the independent sector is expanding. Even religious liberty is advancing, though inconsistently and slowly. Decisions over everything from career to marriage have gone from political acts to personal choice. The dramatic changes in the PRC and the country's great potential become particularly evident to Westerners when they visit China. Go to Beijing or Shanghai, which I've visited several times, and you'd think you were in any major American or European city. It's not just the tall buildings, but the active, busy, and energetic people. I recently returned from a conference in Shenyang, a large city in Manchuria, in China's northeast. Once viewed as part of the PRC's rustbelt, Shenyang appears to be participating in China's rapid economic growth. But more impressive to me is the relatively free personal life that I observed. In traditional communist systems politics was never far behind. From public symbols to personal relations, politics is everything. That is to be expected in societies where expressing the wrong sentiment about the wrong idea or politician can result in imprisonment or death.

In China there's little public evidence of communism. There's no dictatorial personality cult. There's no sense that someone is listening in to your conversations. Business and travel are generally free. No one demands your papers or asks where you are going -- even foreigners. Computers and cell phones are widely available; car ownership is increasingly common. People engage in a cat and mouse game with the censorship authorities over internet access. Personal interaction also is relatively uninhibited. People are friendly and open. They want a better world for their families just like we do for ours.

None of these change the fact that China is not free. And as much as we can hope for a freer PRC in the future, a number of nations, such as Russia, have been moving backward in recent days. Predicting China's future is not for the faint-hearted. There's reason for the U.S. to be watchful and wary when dealing with a growing PRC. But the two nations have no reason to come into conflict. China will inevitably grow more influential, especially in East Asia; the U.S. will inevitably see its dominance fade, starting in East Asia. Such a loss of influence might be painful, but not critical. America will remain essentially secure even if Washington no longer dominates every continent in every way.

The most foolish policy would be to treat the PRC as an enemy and the Chinese as enemies. That would guarantee precisely the result which Washington wants to avoid, whether the PRC remains authoritarian or becomes democratic. It is time for the U.S. to become a normal country again. Washington's duty is to protect Americans, not order around everyone else on earth. If U.S. policymakers don't recognize reality on their own, the Chinese are the first of many other peoples likely to force Americans to learn this lesson.

Copyright © 2010 Campaign for Liberty