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## Engaging China to maintain peace in East Asia

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While the U.S. remains involved in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, East Asia contains the seeds of potentially bigger conflicts. China holds the key to maintaining regional peace.

For instance, the Republic of Korea is imposing economic sanctions on North Korea after the latter sank a South Korean naval vessel. A military response could set off a retaliatory spiral leading to war. With 27,000 troops stationed on the Korean peninsula, Washington could not easily stay out of any conflict.

Less obvious but potentially more serious is the future status of Taiwan. The People's Republic of China insists that the island, separated from the mainland by Japanese occupation and civil war, return to Beijing's authority. The Taiwanese people are never likely to support control by the PRC.

Although China-Taiwan relations have improved with a new government in Taipei, Beijing may grow impatient as its power increases and be tempted to substitute coercion for negotiation. However, Washington has implicitly guaranteed Taipei's security, which could lead to a serious military confrontation between the U.S. and China.

How to maintain the peace in East Asia? Washington must engage the PRC on both issues.

America's relationship with Beijing will have a critical impact on the development of the 21st century. Disagreements are inevitable; conflict is not.

China is determined to take an increasingly important international role. It is entitled to do so. However, it should equally commit to acting responsibly.

As the PRC grows economically, expands its military, and gains diplomatic influence, it will be able to greatly influence international events, especially in East Asia. If it does so for good rather than ill, its neighbors will be less likely to fear the emerging superpower. Most important, responsible Chinese policy will diminish the potential for military confrontation between Beijing and Asian states as well as the U.S.

In return, Washington should welcome China into the global leadership circle if its rise remains peaceful and responsible. American analysts have expressed concern about a Chinese military build-up intended to prevent U.S. intervention along the PRC's border. But the U.S. cannot expect other states to accept American dominance forever. Any American attempt to contain Beijing is likely to spark—predictably—a hostile response from China.

Instead, Washington policymakers should prepare for a world in which reciprocity replaces diktat. The U.S. could encourage Chinese responsibility by adopting policies that highlight the importance of the PRC's role in promoting regional peace and stability. Such an approach is most needed to deal with the Korean peninsula and Taiwan.

For instance, Beijing could play a critical role in restraining and ultimately transforming the North. So far the PRC has declined to apply significant pressure on its long-time ally. In fact, North Korea's Kim Jong-il recently visited China, presumably in pursuit of additional economic aid and investment.

His quid pro quo might have been a professed willingness to return to the Six-Party nuclear talks. But few analysts believe there is much chance of a nuclear deal whether or not these negotiations proceed—and almost certainly no chance unless the PRC is prepared to get tough with the North, including threatening to cut off generous food and energy shipments.

To encourage Beijing, Washington should suggest that China would share the nightmare if an unstable North Korea expands its nuclear arsenal. The North's nuclear program would yield concern even in the best of cases. But the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea is no best case.

The regime started a war in 1950 and engaged in terrorism into the 1980s. Pyongyang has cheerfully sold weapons to all comers. Worse, today it appears to be in the midst of an uncertain leadership transition. If North Korean forces sank the South Korean vessel, then either Kim Jong-il is ready to risk war or has lost control of the military, which is ready to risk war.

The Obama administration should indicate to the PRC that Washington will face sustained pressure to take military action against the North—which obviously would not be in Beijing's interest. Should the DPRK amass a nuclear arsenal, the U.S. would have no more desire than China to be in the middle of a messy geopolitical confrontation, especially one that could go nuclear.

Thus, Washington would not be inclined to block decisions by the ROK and Japan to create countervailing nuclear arsenals. Just as the prospect of a North Korean bomb worries the U.S., the possibility of a Japanese nuclear capacity would unsettle the PRC.

Should China take the tough, even risky (from its standpoint) steps necessary to moderate or transform Pyongyang, Washington should promise to reciprocate. The DPRK poses the greatest threat to regional peace and security. Eliminate it, and eliminate the principal justification for a U.S. military presence in East Asia. Most obvious would be a promise not to maintain American bases or troops in the Korean peninsula, whether united or divided. Pulling back units from Japan would also be warranted.

The issue of Taiwan requires Chinese forbearance rather than action. A Chinese commitment to peaceful resolution of Taiwan's status would eliminate the geopolitical dispute most likely to set America and Beijing at military odds.

The PRC already has triumphed on the international stage since most nations, and all major countries, recognize China over Taiwan. Winning formal control over Taipei would offer Beijing symbolic rather than practical benefits.

Moreover, China's economy has surpassed that of Taiwan and today benefits enormously from Taiwanese investment. The growing economic interdependence across the Taiwan Strait also diminishes the importance of Taipei's de facto political independence.

The two peoples if not the two states are growing increasingly interrelated. The lack of political control over 23 million people may pose a nationalistic affront to the PRC, but it is one Beijing should bear to promote its larger objective of attaining global leadership.

In contrast, using military force—whether intimidation, blockade, or invasion—against the island would generate costs far out of proportion to any possible gains in terms of prestige. A hostile regional and

Western response would be inevitable.

China's neighbors certainly would see the PRC's rise as anything but peaceful. Any coercive act would be a powerful impetus for Japan to create a larger military and adopt a more aggressive foreign policy.

The greatest risk would be a confrontation with the U.S. Economic retaliation would be certain and military intervention possible. Given the length and strength of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, no American administration could easily stand by if the PRC used force against Taipei.

Chinese aggression also would validate the warnings of American hawks, who are pressing for ever higher military outlays despite America's dearth of serious adversaries. Even Europe would see Beijing as a threatening actor, rather as major European powers came to view Wilhelmine Germany, and likely would retaliate economically.

Washington should press the PRC to take two simple steps: renounce the use of force to resolve Taiwan's status and remove missiles now targeting the island. In return, Taiwan should indicate that it will not ally with any party or allow other powers to use bases against the PRC. The U.S. should explain that it has no intention of intervening militarily against China, maintaining a military alliance with Taiwan, or using military facilities on the island. Washington also should pull back other military units stationed nearby, such as the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force on Okinawa.

Demonstrating its pacific intent would enable the PRC to defuse proposals to revamp America's alliances with South Korea and Japan to deal with other contingencies—meaning China. Although Beijing's rise has been steady, its continued rise will be smoother if achieved in cooperation with its neighbors and without hostility from them or America. The PRC's own actions will be the most important factor in determining other nations' reactions.

It is often said that Americans live in a dangerous world. We do. But shoe and underwear bombers do not match the threat posed by nation states armed with nuclear weapons, intercontinental ballistic missiles, carrier groups, and armored divisions.

While the future is uncertain, it is difficult to imagine the U.S. at war with Russia, India, or any significant power other than China. Thankfully, conflict with the latter also remains unlikely.

But the mere possibility of a future military confrontation reinforces the importance of the world's two most important nations working to defuse potential conflicts. Which means cooperating on North Korea and Taiwan. Doing so successfully would go a long way to make the 21st century one of peace and stability.

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