

Stop Treating Friends Like Foes

DOUG BANDOW

APRIL 22, 2021

To counter China, the Biden administration should recognize its allies, especially India.

In the burgeoning confrontation between the U.S. and China, America's greatest ally often is Beijing. Its ever more aggressive and even confrontational behavior, leavened with insulting "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, has turned many nations against the People's Republic of China. America should arrange a world tour by President Xi Jinping and his top confederates. They would do the seemingly impossible: drive the entire world toward Washington.

Unfortunately, U.S. officials often commit similar mistakes. Hubris, hypocrisy, and sanctimony have long bedeviled American diplomacy. During the Cold War "The Ugly American" was both a book title and description of U.S. officials acting abroad.

President Donald Trump's second secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, personified this stereotype. Cluelessly talking about America having its "swagger" back, he wandered the globe attempting to dictate to others. That approach rarely worked. Instead, he often caused allies and adversaries alike to do the opposite of what he wanted. He tended to succeed only when he was sacrificing American values and interests—essentially turning Mideast policy over to the likes of Mohammed bin Salman and Benjamin Netanyahu, for instance.

The best American strategy toward the PRC is to rely on an informal concert of nations to do what comes naturally and restrain China. Despite the almost feverish anti-PRC feelings now coursing through Washington, Beijing does not directly threaten America.

The PRC's greatest weakness may be its geography. Surrounded by more than a dozen nations, China's defense is difficult. Over the last century Beijing has been variously at war with Vietnam, Russia (Soviet Union), Korea (Republic of Korea), Japan, and India. The most recent and still sometimes hot fight is the last, with Delhi.

Compare this to the U.S., with oceans east and west and pacific neighbors north and south. America's Asian allies and friends also enjoy better strategic positions. Japan, Australia, and the Philippines are all island nations. South Korea is a peninsula. India borders six states, but four pose only minimal military threats.

U.S. military strength far surpasses that of China. Nor is Beijing catching up in spending. Last year the PRC's military expenditures ran about \$250 billion, or 1.7 percent of GDP. America's comparable numbers were \$785 billion and 3.8 percent. Beijing looks more powerful than it is because Washington wastefully dissipates its forces around the globe, protecting wealthy European allies and intervening in civil wars and failed states throughout the Mideast and Central Asia. The denizens of Zhongnanhai are not so myopic. Indeed, an outside observer might think that China was secretly directing U.S. foreign policy.

No one imagines a Chinese carrier group heading for Hawaii, let alone the West Coast. The U.S. Pacific possessions are useful militarily for Washington, but hardly worth war to China. The PRC might eventually marry greater military forces and aggressively malign intentions, but even then, the tyranny of distance, which now operates against the U.S., would apply to Beijing. And America's nuclear arsenal would long deter China, however much the latter expands forces now much inferior.

Of course, the usual hawks are making the usual demands to go on a wartime footing because the PRC is doing more than Washington's allies, which all prefer to rely on the U.S. rather than do their own heavy lifting. America faces few serious threats other than those of its own making—such as terrorism resulting from constant intervention in other nations and conflicts. Nevertheless, the U.S. again led the world in military outlays last year. As for Washington's Asia allies, partners, and potential associates, though far closer to China and presumed to be in much greater danger, not so much. That they spend less is to be expected given their smaller economies, but they also make far less effort.

Consider military outlays as a percentage of GDP of nations that rely upon America for their defense: Republic of Korea 2.5, Australia 2.3, Taiwan 2.2, Japan 1.0, Philippines 1.0. What of other nations that should be concerned about the PRC? Singapore 3.2, Vietnam 1.7, Indonesia 1.1. These results are pitiful, especially for those states that are clamoring for Washington to *do something!* The ROK dreads provocation or invasion, Taipei fears being swallowed whole, Tokyo worries about the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the Philippines has seen its claimed waters become a parking lot for hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels. Yet none of them treats its military as a true priority.

Helping improve the balance of power is India. For years seen as ready to follow the PRC with warp speed economic development, it has consistently failed to adopt the necessary market-oriented reforms. So, it continues to lag well behind China. Narendra Modi's premiership has been a particular disappointment, since he uses violent Hindu nationalism to distract attention from his failure to address his country's sclerotic economy. Indeed, he has retreated on policy in important ways. As a result, India, which briefly edged ahead of the PRC in rate of economic growth, has again fallen behind.

Nevertheless, Modi seeks a larger global role for India. And Delhi is creating a military capable of fulfilling grander geopolitical ambitions. Last year outlays ran \$64.1 billion, or 2.5 percent of GDP. Delhi is active in Southeast Asia and has begun sending its navy into the south Pacific.

Moreover, U.S.-India relations have improved markedly since the Cold War, when Washington tilted toward Pakistan while India forged a close relationship with the Soviet Union. Ties also got a boost during the George W. Bush administration, which abandoned sanctions against Delhi for its nuclear program. More recently Beijing's aggressiveness, most notably its violent attack on Indian soldiers over the disputed border in the Himalayas last May, pushed Delhi toward Washington.

Although there is little inclination in India to become America's catspaw—the Indian nuclear weapons program is intended to prevent U.S. coercion as well as protect against China and Pakistan—there is broad agreement that greater bilateral cooperation is justified. For instance, researcher Sushant Sareen urged “a much closer alliance with the U.S. and its allies.”

The *Hindustan Times* editorialized that India should “double down on its partnership with the U.S.... and be a part of any club that seeks to contain Chinese power.”

The Trump administration continued to push a closer partnership, including through the Quad, short for Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, an informal relationship which includes Australia and Japan. The Biden administration continued this process, and the March meeting was viewed as a great success.

However, the Biden team elsewhere unaccountably undermined these efforts for no good reason. The first was threatening to sanction Delhi for purchasing Russian weapons. The offending legislation stems from the voracious Russophobia that has come to dominate Congress because Moscow played tough—and a bit dirty—in response to Washington’s reckless expansion of NATO contra its promises after the end of the Cold War. Of course, Washington would never have accepted similar Russian behavior along America’s borders—imagine Moscow bringing Mexico into the Warsaw Pact. Hysteria would have swept Washington! No matter. The War Party views hypocrisy and sanctimony as virtues.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin recently raised the possibility of sanctions if India purchases Moscow’s S-400 anti-aircraft system. He was pressed by Bob Menendez, the hawkish Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who recently wrote to Austin: “If India chooses to go forward with its purchase of the S-400, that act will clearly constitute a significant, and therefore sanctionable, transaction with the Russian defense sector.”

Unsurprisingly, such demands—which reflect a mix of arrogance, believing what Washington says goes, and commercial bias, seeking to increase the sale of American weapons—go over badly around the world. Especially with a nationalistic rising power like Delhi, long prickly over colonial slights, currently facing another arrogant nationalistic power, namely China.

Also, early in April the U.S. staged a Freedom of Navigation Operation in India’s Exclusive Economic Zone in the Indian Ocean, claiming the right to travel freely while Delhi insisted that its permission was required. The Seventh Fleet explained: “We conduct routine and regular FONOPs, as we have done in the past and will continue to in the future. FONOPs are not about one country, nor are they about making political statements.” Indeed, navigational freedom is a major American interest, but how best to assert that interest requires prudential attention to other factors, such as improving bilateral U.S.-India relations. If nothing else, the two governments could develop a less contentious process to register such disagreements in the future.

Neither of these controversies—which are not unique to India, as Washington also sanctioned Turkey over its purchase of S-400 missiles—should alter the positive trajectory of relations that both governments recognize as important. Nevertheless, national ego and image matter wherever government leaders gather. Unfortunately, the Biden administration made a poor start to an otherwise potentially beautiful friendship. Sanctions risk poisoning the relationship. And FONOPs could undermine naval relations, the most important area of potential military cooperation.

Trump and Modi forged close personal ties, despite Pompeo’s numerous missteps. Even before the May incident Indian Defense Secretary Ajay Kuman opined: “To ensure peace, security, and economic progress, it is critical for India to cooperate closely with the U.S.A.”

The new administration should more carefully coordinate its approach, pushing for sustained cooperation rather than alliance dependence, and making the locus of activity with America's allies and partners rather than Washington. For, as noted earlier, to the extent that China's military poses a threat, it is to those allies, not America. Already Delhi has had naval exercises, both bilateral and multilateral, and with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Just as Beijing hopes to deter American intervention in the Asia-Pacific, Washington's friends together should forestall Chinese aggression in those same waters.

Perhaps the most important factor for the U.S. to remember after Pompeo's frequent self-immolations is how often Washington officials undermine their own policy. In the Cold War, other nations often spoke of the Ugly American. Today, Washington should ensure that other governments instead talk about the Ugly Chinese.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.