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China Feeling Its Oats

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| [Justin Logan](#)^[2]

News reports indicate that in late June, China sent two Su-27s across the middle line—the de facto partition between China and Taiwan—in pursuit of an American U-2 spy plane. There are conflicting details about what actually transpired. The *Wall Street Journal* report cites Taiwan’s defense ministry stating that it scrambled two F-16s to intercept the Sukhois^[3], while the *Financial Times* cites a senior Taiwanese defense official stating that “this was not between Taiwan and China, but between China and the U.S. The Chinese crossed the line to repel a perceived intrusion by a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft.”^[4]

Meantime, CJCS chairman Admiral Mike Mullen has a boilerplate op-ed in the *New York Times*^[5] about his recent interactions with his counterpart, Gen. Chen Bingde, in both the U.S. and China. Mullen admits that there are points of disagreement, but suggests trying to “make the [U.S.-China] relationship better, by seeking strategic trust.” His agenda for doing this seems to amount to focusing on areas of agreement and skirting over the points of disagreement.

America’s China policy suffers from profound contradiction^[6]. On the one hand, Washington shows little willingness to allow China an increased role even in its own backyard. The United States is fond of referring to itself as an “Asia-Pacific power”—just imagine Washington’s response if China began referring to itself as a “Western hemisphere power” or some such. Mullen even complains that he doesn’t “fully understand China’s justification for the rapid growth in its defense spending or its long-term military modernization goals.” Mullen, like Donald Rumsfeld before him^[7], may want to brush up on the Gospel of Matthew^[8].

On the other hand, American support for increased Chinese integration into the world economy has contributed mightily to China’s economic growth and, by extension, its growing military power. As a RAND Corporation report chaired by Zalmay Khalilzad put it in the late 1990s, America’s China policy amounts to “conengagement”^[9]—part containment, part engagement.

The problem with this policy is that it sets America up to contain a country that it is simultaneously helping close the gap in relative power. Various projections estimate that China will become the world’s richest country somewhere between 10 and 20 years from now. At that point, it will have the ability to devote even more of its wealth to military power than it does today. And, it should be added, China does not have a manic ideology^[10] fueling its foreign

policy like the United States does. It seems quite focused on developing the ability to secure its own neighborhood for itself, while Washington fritters away power the world over.

One might protest that America has allies in Asia that will help carry the load of containing China. But America's policy toward its Asian allies has dampened, not fueled, its allies' willingness to devote larger shares of their wealth to military power to hedge against China. Whenever Washington "reassures" its Asian allies that it intends to be the balancer-of-first-resort in Asia, which it does every time China kicks up a wake, our allies sigh and refocus on domestic problems. Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser identified the collective action problems inherent in imbalanced alliances over 40 years ago ^[11]. Official Washington seems ignorant or not to care about these problems.

Washington and Beijing make up two sides of the most important bilateral relationship in the world. That relationship could take several forms over the next few decades. First, it is always possible that China could collapse because of a flawed political/economic system, keeping it as a second-tier power. But in the event that result does not come to pass, the questions for Washington to answer are going to become harder and harder.

After 70-plus years of being the world's preeminent power, and 20 years of being its only great power, will Washington be content to make room for China? Would it ultimately be content to play second-fiddle to China in politico-military terms in East Asia? If not, where does the relationship go from here? I can't count the number of people I've asked this question, and not one seems to have an answer.

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[7] <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2005/2005-speeches/first-plenary-session-the-hon-donald-rumsfeld>

[8] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+7%3A1-5&version=KJV>

[9] http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2007/MR1082.pdf

[10] <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/washingtons-foreign-policy-hypochondria-5652>

[11] <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1927082>