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What to Do About China?

An Op/Ed By Doug Bandow

The United States is the world's dominant power. America will remain influential for decades to come. But China is likely to eventually force Washington to share its leadership position.

Such a change would be uncomfortable for American policymakers. But Washington doesn't have to dominate the world to guarantee U.S. security. Washington need only possess a military capable of preventing other nations or groups from threatening the United States. And that should become the basic objective of American foreign policy.

Today, the United States stands as an international colossus. America accounts for roughly half the world's

military outlays. Washington spends more on defense, even after adjusting for inflation, than at any point since World War II, including during two very hot wars in Vietnam and Korea.

Moreover, the United States is allied with every major industrialized state except China and Russia. Washington is friendly with most other countries, including middling and emerging powers such as India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt, and South Africa.

The United States enjoys a more positive security environment than at any time during the Cold War. The world will always be dangerous and unpredictable. We hate having to go through metal detectors at airports, but school kids no longer practice getting under their desks for shelter during a Soviet nuclear strike. There are no Red Army tanks poised to invade Germany's Fulda Gap.

We still worry about terrorism, as we must, but terrorists are no substitute for nation states with nuclear weapons, intercontinental missiles, carrier groups, armored divisions, and more. Terrorists attack civilians because they don't have

any of these weapons, and thus the ability to destroy nations. The United States faces no enemies of note: North Korea, Iran, and Cuba simply don't make the grade. One American carrier group has more firepower than all of their decrepit militaries together.

Even Russia, not exactly friend or foe, is a military mess. Moscow can beat up on the country of Georgia, little more.

This leaves the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The PRC poses a number of challenges to America. Its economy continues to grow rapidly. China owns a lot of Uncle Sam's debt, but Beijing can ill afford to dump its U.S. assets without wrecking the value of its own portfolio.

The human rights situation is bad. Nevertheless, there is a lot more individual space today than 20 or 30 years ago. And the horrid, murderous years of Mao Zedong are long past. The Communist Party cannot be certain of its ability to hold onto power over time.

Finally, Beijing resists U.S. foreign policy in a number of areas. The PRC opposes sanctioning Iran and aids



Third World despots in Burma and Zimbabwe. They also have resisted applying tougher sanctions on North Korea. Yet even a cooperative China might not be enough for Washington to succeed in dealing with those nations.

Of greatest concern to many analysts is the PRC's ongoing military buildup.

At a superficial level, the numbers look worrisome. Chinese spending has slowed this year, but outlays have been increasing at double-digit rates. Exact expenditures are difficult to estimate, but Beijing's real defense budget probably runs between \$70 billion and \$100 billion.

Yet that number is less impressive than it sounds. First, the Chinese military starts at a low base. Beijing traditionally has had large quantities but low qualities of men and material. Much of the PRC's recent spending has been devoted to the difficult task of reversing replacing quantity (by cutting numbers of soldiers and aircraft, for instance) with quality. Doing so takes a lot of money and time.

Despite its efforts, China remains far behind on major measures of firepower. The United States possesses a vastly larger and more sophisticated nuclear arsenal and air force. Washington has 11 carrier groups; Beijing has none.

Second, Washington continues to spend far more than the PRC on the military. Total U.S. expenditures will hit \$750 billion next year. Ignore the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and America still spends well over half a trillion dollars. Even taking into account higher personnel costs in America, Washington spends a multiple of China's outlays. Beijing is not overtaking the United States.

Third, Washington is not alone. Close allies include Japan, Australia, South Korea, Singapore, and more. Russia, Vietnam, and especially India also are important counterweights to Beijing. All have an incentive to work to constrain the PRC. In fact, several Asian states are improving their navies.

In short, China is in no position, and will be in no position for years, or probably decades, to threaten the United States, or to exert the kind of global influence that America today enjoys. It's difficult to predict the long term, but for Beijing to build the kind of force necessary to directly challenge America will take an extraordinary investment over a long period. During that time, the United States will be able to respond as

necessary.

Still, none of this means the PRC's military buildup is not having an impact. Beijing is focusing its investment on two objectives. The first is creating forces capable of intimidating Taiwan. The Taiwanese have created a capitalist and democratic state of which they should be proud. However, Chinese leaders view the island as part of a united China and, rather like Abraham Lincoln to the American South, aren't inclined to take "no" for an answer.

The second is to create a military capable of preventing U.S. action against Beijing. In a word, the PRC is seeking to achieve deterrence.

China is investing in its nuclear forces, to prevent Washington from making nuclear threats. Beijing also is improving its missile and submarine capabilities, to sink U.S. carriers. The Chinese military is developing asymmetric warfare abilities, particularly to destroy American satellites and attack America's information infrastructure.

These are formidable capabilities, but they offer little offensive potential. There will be no Red carrier forces steaming toward Hawaii. A nuclear strike against America would result in catastrophic retaliation. The People's Liberation Army will not be deploying on U.S. territory. At base, China is seeking to counter America's ability to attack China.

As a result, Washington will eventually face a world in which it no longer dominates every country at every point on every continent. Uncomfortable as that world might prove to be, it is inevitable. The United States simply cannot afford to spend what it will be necessary to overcome China's (and other nations') growing capabilities.

The problem is that offense costs far more than defense. The PRC doesn't need 11 carrier groups to fight America's 11 carrier groups. Beijing only needs enough subs and missiles to put U.S. naval forces at serious risk. Then no president is likely to send the fleet into the Taiwan Strait.

Washington is likely to face similar challenges from other emerging powers in the years ahead. For instance, India is unlikely to attack the United States. But India likely will develop a military capable of deterring Washington from ever attempting to coerce India.

The United States should adopt a similar strategy involving its friends and allies. The best way to constrain Beijing, to ensure that the PRC's rise proves to be truly peaceful, as Chinese

officials routinely claim it will be, is to encourage other states to deter China.

For example, it is in neither America's nor Japan's interest if the only way Tokyo can be defended is by the United States risking Los Angeles. Far better for Japan to create a potent military to secure its own territory and protect its own commerce. Nations like Australia, South Korea, Philippines, and Singapore need to get over their war-time fears of Tokyo and cooperate with Japan to safeguard East Asia.

India also can play a role. It has held naval maneuvers with Vietnam and battled China for influence in Burma. One of America's great advantages is its strong ties to so many of the world's prosperous democracies, which are now capable of protecting themselves and their regions.

This doesn't mean the United States should ignore Asia. But it suggests a new role for Washington. Rather than put allied states on an international dole, essentially turning them into a foreign version of the welfare queens that President Ronald Reagan long ago criticized, the United States should help them become independent.

America should watch from afar to guard against extraordinary threats that friendly countries cannot handle. But the United States should not spend Americans' time, resources, money, and especially lives in an attempt to micro-manage the globe. Attempting social engineering at home is bad. Attempting social engineering abroad is far worse.

Defending America is a vital interest. We should spare no expense to secure our people, liberties, and territory.

In contrast, intervening everywhere around the globe is not a vital interest. With a \$1.6 trillion deficit this year and another \$10 trillion in red ink expected over the next decade, Washington can no longer afford to act as the global policeman. We have no choice but to make defense of America the basis of our foreign policy. ●

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