

Why We Shouldn't Be Surprised by China's Aggressiveness

Written by William Wagstaff

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WILLIAM WAGSTAFF, AUG 12 2013

China's activities in East Asia have given many observers uneasy feelings. China continues to act belligerently towards its neighbors, including India, Japan, and the many countries that lay claim to the South China Sea. And with other countries "pivoting" to Asia, this list now includes the United States and Russia. Many worry that China's actions signal a willingness to engage in conflict to further its national interests. And they may be right. What no one should be, however, is surprised. China is merely following the developmental path that so many countries have in the past. This includes the United States' own experience.

Over the past few decades, and largely in response to Deng Xiaoping's reforms during the 70s and 80s, China's economy has rapidly expanded, fueling its meteoric rise in international politics. Whether or not China's economic growth will continue is subject to much debate and cannot be fully addressed in the space here, but I will note that in 2010 a *Foreign Policy Magazine* article by Robert Fogel[1] predicted that: "In 2040, the Chinese economy will reach \$123 trillion, or nearly three times the economic output of the entire globe in 2000. China's per capita income will hit \$85,000, more than double the forecast for the European Union, and also much higher than that of India and Japan." Attempting to assess whether or not this claim is will hold is beyond the scope of this article and would lead to speculation.[2] What is important to grasp here is the sheer magnitude of what is happening in China. Millions are being lifted out of poverty and becoming active participants in the economy.

As a result, an expanding economy creates new economic interests. China has been very active in South America,[3] Africa,[4] and its own backyard[5] looking to tap new markets and find the resources necessary to continue fueling its voracious economy. Just as important as its new economic interests is China's new military muscle. China has been using its economic clout to finance a rapidly growing and modernizing military – including its new aircraft carrier and stealth jet programs. Most important for this discussion has been the expansion and modernization of China's Navy,[6] which China has been using to project power within its region. The point here is not to assess the strength of China's military, but rather to show the close relationship between economic and military power. And with this newfound power, China is becoming ever more involved in international affairs. In this regard, China is no different from any of the great powers that preceded it.

In fact, these developments have some close parallels in the United States' own historical experience. The United States experienced rapid economic growth during its industrialization in the latter half of the 19th century. Just last year, *The New York Times* ran an article[7] about Robert J. Gordon's paper, "Is U.S. Economic Growth Over?," in which it briefly describes the consequences of the Second Industrial Revolution in the United States. Among these consequences was an economic boom that lasted from 1890 until the 1970s. What was particularly special about this "Revolution" and subsequent economic growth is that it matured the United States' economy and gave it a global awareness. New companies, such as US Steel and General Electric, emerged and quickly set their eyes on foreign markets and resources – just as Chinese companies are doing.

Not surprisingly, this began around the same time that the United States became more belligerent abroad. One such example is the Spanish-America War that was fought at the tail end of the 19th century. Newfound American naval power enabled the United States to fight in both the Caribbean and the Pacific. This war was followed by more

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"interventions" in the Philippines, Panama, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Haiti.[8] To further demonstrate the United States' naval prowess, President Teddy Roosevelt had the "Great White Fleet" sail around the world between 1907 and 1909. This occurred after rapid modernization of the US Navy, much like the modernization China's Navy is now undergoing (though, granted, with a different technological starting point).

As you can see, there are some strong parallels between the United States' and China's developmental paths. These examples also sketch the ties between economic and security interests. From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that China is acting the way it is. China is merely following the course of "normal" development, which is not always a pretty thing for any country. For further evidence, we can again turn to American history. The United States' westward expansion and "Manifest Destiny" can be easily compared to China's westward expansion into Tibet. Both were land grabs and both had disastrous consequences for the indigenous populations.

Additionally, observers would do well to notice that the "Monroe Doctrine" explicitly warned foreign powers to stay out of the United States' backyard. The year was 1823 and America was hardly a world power, but it wanted potential competitors to stay out of the region. In much the same way, China is trying to assert its influence in East Asia and keep other world powers (read: the United States) out. Thus, China's confrontational tactics, from this perspective, can be viewed as the normal behavior of a maturing power rather than the belligerence of a deviant state. China is only following the developmental path of the states before it.

Now, I want to caution the reader. I am not trying to say that China is developing in exactly the same way as the United States – far from it. The two developments, historically speaking, are more than 100 years apart and the world is a far different place from that of the Second Industrial Revolution. Ease of transportation and communication has made the world a much smaller place than it used to be. I only mean to show that, when reviewing the broad trends, China's behavior should not be viewed as abnormal. I am also not advocating that belligerence be tolerated and dismissed as the "normal course of events." Rather, by understanding that China's actions do not spring from hubris, a love of violence, or even an inferiority complex, policy-makers can more effectively engage their Chinese counterparts in an atmosphere of understanding and trust that will better enable mutually beneficial outcomes. Learning from the past, policy-makers will be better equipped to accommodate China's rise and aid China in becoming a responsible stakeholder with an interest in a *peaceful* international system.

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[1] Fogel, Robert. (2010) "\$123,000,000,000,000," *Foreign Policy* (January/February). Accessed July 30. Available at: <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/04/1230000000000000>

[2] And there is some reason to be pessimistic as it appears, at least for now, that economic growth is shifting back towards the Global North; *The Economist*. (2013) "A World Turned Upside Down," *The Economist Blog* (August 1). Accessed August 1. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/buttonwood/2013/08/economies-and-markets>.

[3] ISN Security Watch. (2013) "US and China Battle it Out for Latin America," *Oilprice. com*. Accessed July 31. Available at: <http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/South-America/US-and-China-Battle-it-Out-for-Latin-America.html>

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