

Asia Goes Missing in Assessing China's Military Challenge to the US

Written by Robert Sutter

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ROBERT SUTTER, JAN 28 2014

Assessments of Chinese military capabilities by the Department of Defense, the Congressional Research Service (CRS), CSIS and the Carnegie Endowment portray growing challenges and sometimes dire implications for the United States.[1] Such studies would be more realistic if they devoted more attention to constraints on China actually using military coercion or force to confront the United States. Some specialist assessments rightly point to Chinese domestic preoccupations and Beijing's interdependence with the American economy that presumably constrain China from confronting America with military power.[2] Also needed is a careful assessment of China's position in Asia.

It is argued here that China remains insecure in nearby Asia despite over two decades of priority efforts to improve its position. Comparing Chinese and U.S. influence underlines China's shortcomings and U.S. strengths.

Nearby Asia is where China has always exerted greatest influence and where China devotes the lion's share of foreign policy attention. It contains security and sovereignty issues (e.g. Taiwan) of top importance. It is the main arena of interaction with the United States. The region's economic importance far surpasses rest of world (China is Africa's biggest trader but it does more trade with South Korea). Stability along the rim of China is essential for China's continued economic growth—the lynch pin of leadership legitimacy and continued Communist rule. Without a secure periphery and facing formidable American presence and influence, China almost certainly calculates that challenging the United States poses grave dangers for the PRC regime.[3]

China's Insecure Position

Chinese strengths in nearby Asia are:

- China is a leading trading partner and there is heavy investment to China from neighboring countries;
- China's growing web of road, rail, river, electric power and pipelines with neighbors;
- China's attentive bilateral and multilateral diplomacy;
- China's expanding military capabilities.

Key weaknesses and limitations are:

- China refuses leadership in the region that involves costly and risky efforts to support common goods involving regional security and development. China avoids such obligations unless there is adequate benefit for a narrow set of tangible Chinese interests.[4]
- Chinese recent assertiveness toward several neighbors and the United States has weakened Chinese regional influence. The actions have reminded China's neighbors of Beijing's disruptive and domineering ways in the region throughout the Cold War.[5]
- China's advancing influence in the 25 years since the Cold War is mediocre. China's longstanding practice of building an image of consistent and righteous behavior in foreign affairs blocks realistic policies, especially when dealing with disputes and differences with neighbors and the United States. The Chinese

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government has never acknowledged making a mistake in foreign policy. A dispute with neighbors is never China's fault. If Beijing chooses not to blame the neighbor, its default position is to blame outside forces usually involving the United States. Also, Chinese elites and public opinion have long been conditioned about China's historic victimization at the hands of outside powers. They are quick to find offense while impervious of the need for recognition of fault on their part.

Measuring China's Relationships

Major Powers

Japan, arguably Asia's richest country and the key ally of the United States, has seen relations with China at their lowest point. India's relations with China are mixed but overall worse than ten years ago. Russian and Chinese interest in close alignment has waxed and waned and has appeared secondary to their respective relationships with the West.

Key Middle Powers

Improved relations with Taiwan have not reached the political opposition which opposes recent trends, anticipating presidential elections with the ruling party having very low public approval. Close Sino-South Korean economic ties accompanied marked decline in political relations over the past decade, notably on account of China's perceived enabling North Korean provocations. North Korea, China's only official ally, poses a range of critical problems, with no solutions in sight.

Others

Disputed claims in the South China Sea seriously complicate developing Chinese relations with Southeast Asian countries. China's remarkable military modernization raises suspicions on the part of a number of China's neighbors, including such middle powers as Australia that depend on exports to China. These neighbors build their own military power and work cooperatively with one another and the United States in the face of China's military advances.

Economic and Diplomatic Limitations

Economic Interdependence

Half of Chinese trade is conducted by foreign invested enterprises in China and the resulting processing trade shows China often adding only a small amount to the product; and the finished product often depends on sales to the United States or the European Union.

Lagging Investment and Aid

The large amount of Asian and international investment that went to China did not go to other neighboring countries, hurting their economic development. China's actual aid (as opposed to financing that will be repaid in money or commodities) to Asia is very small with the probable exception of Chinese aid to North Korea. The dizzying array of agreements in the active Chinese diplomacy does not hide China's reluctance to undertake costly obligations.

China in the Shadow of U.S. Leadership

U.S. weaknesses in the Asia included the foreign policies of the George W. Bush administration which were very unpopular with regional elites and public opinion. As the Barack Obama government has refocused U.S. attention positively on the Asia-Pacific region, regional concerns shifted to worry that U.S. budget difficulties and political gridlock in Washington seemed to undermine the ability of the United States to sustain support for regional responsibilities.

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U.S. strengths in the Asia-Pacific region involve:

Security

In most of Asia, governments are strong, viable and make policy. In general, the officials see their governments' legitimacy resting on economic development, which requires a stable international environment. Unfortunately, Asia is not particularly stable and most regional governments privately are wary of each other. As a result, they look to the United States to provide the security they need. They recognize that the U.S. security role is very expensive and involves great risk, including large scale casualties if necessary. They also recognize that neither China nor any other Asian power or coalition of powers is able or willing to undertake even a fraction of these risks, costs and responsibilities.

Economic

Most Asian governments depend importantly on export oriented growth. The United States has run a massive trade deficit with China, and a total annual trade deficit with Asia valued at over \$350 billion. Asian government officials recognize that China, which runs an overall trade surplus, and other trading partners of Asia will not bear even a fraction of the cost of such large trade deficits that nonetheless are very important for Asia governments.

Government Engagement

The Bush administration was effective in interaction with Asia's powers. The Obama government has built on these strengths. Its consultation with stakeholders before coming to policy decisions has been broadly welcomed. Meanwhile, U.S. military, security and intelligence organizations have grown wide ranging webs of security and intelligence relationships.

Non-Government Engagement

U.S. longstanding business, religious, media, educational and other non-government interchange is unique and reinforces overall U.S. influence. Almost 50 years of generally color-blind U.S. immigration policy since the ending of discriminatory U.S. restrictions on Asian immigration in 1965 has resulted in the influx of millions of Asia-Pacific migrants who call America home, and who interact with their countries of origin in ways that under gird the American position in the region.

Asian Hedging

As power relations change in the region, notably on account of China's rise, regional governments generally seek to work positively and pragmatically with rising China on the one hand; but on the other hand they seek the reassurance of close security, intelligence, and other ties with the United States amid evidence that rising China shifts to more assertiveness. The U.S. concern to keep stability while fostering economic growth overlaps constructively with the priorities of the vast majority of regional governments.

Bottom Line

China has been working to improve its position in Asia for 25 years; the results are mediocre. Prevailing circumstances show China has a long way to go before its position would allow for a serious military challenge to the United States. Such findings seem to dilute some of the more dire implications raised in recent government and non-government assessments of Chinese military challenge to the United States that fail to assess the situation in Asia, and what it means for China's power and influence.

[1] The Defense Department assessments are annual; see

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http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2013_china_report_final.pdf .The CRS report is updated regularly; see <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/207068.pdf> . The CSIS report is available at <http://csis.org/publication/chinese-military-modernization-and-force-development-1>; The Carnegie report is available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/net_assessment_full.pdf

[2] David Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans* Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012)

[3] A fuller version of this argument is made in Robert Sutter, *Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China: The Legacies and Constraints of China's International Politics since 1949* Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield 2013, p. 314-327

[4] China continues to run a substantial trade surplus and to accumulate large foreign exchange reserves supported by state-directed measures seen to disadvantage trading competitors in Asia and elsewhere. China annually receives over \$6 billion a year of foreign assistance loans and lesser grants that presumably would otherwise be available for other deserving clients in the Asia-Pacific and the world. It carefully adheres to UN budget formulas that keep Chinese dues and other payments remarkably low. It tends to assure that its contributions to the broader good of the international order (e.g. extensive use of Chinese personnel in UN peacekeeping operations) are paid for by others.

[5] The People's Republic of China during the Cold War repeatedly sent security forces across its land borders; trained, financed and supplied tens of thousands of armed insurgents fighting against right-wing and neutral governments in Southeast Asia; and carried out major military invasions of India and Vietnam and repeated armed attacks against Taiwan.

About the author:

Robert Sutter is Professor of Practice of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington DC USA. His most recent books are *Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China: The Legacies and Constraints of China's International Politics since 1949* (Rowman and Littlefield 2013) and *U.S.-Chinese Relations: Perilous Past, Pragmatic Present Second Edition* (Rowman and Littlefield 2013).