

Relations with China

Perspective of defense
by MGSgt Andy B. Anderson

In the 21st century, China is a rapidly rising power that challenges the United States in all aspects of international relations.¹ Under President Barack Obama, the United States generally welcomed the rise of China and sought a constructive relationship to enhance the prosperity and security of both nations.² By contrast, President Donald Trump's administration identifies China as a long-term strategic competitor.³ Furthermore, the

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Thucydides Trap theory warns about the unavoidability of a war between the rising power (China) and the established power (the United States).⁴ The rising power's demand for influence

and respect triggers insecurity from an established power; consequently, potential conflicts become possible.

The Chinese pursuit of hegemony, namely Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the short-term and global hegemony in the future—based on its growing expansionism as well as its military modernization, represents the primary issue of concern for the United States. According to the theory of realism, a hegemon is a “state that dominates all other states in the system.”⁵ In other words, a leading power that achieves hegemony is the one that projects its power onto the other states in its sphere of influence. China is increasingly challenging America's hegemony in Asia. Thus, in order to check China's expanding influence, containment executed through strengthening U.S. alliances, developing new partnerships, and rebuilding our military forces is the best course of action in such circumstances. Containment is a defensive strategy that serves as an alternative to war.⁶ First, I must delineate the issues of concern in the complex security environment between the United States and China.

Issues of Concern

The 2018 National Defense Strategy classifies China as a revisionist power, a state that is trying to alter the established balance of power in the “resilient, but weakening, post-WWII international order.”⁷ A rising China strives for hegemony through its expansionism, which is defined as a policy focused on territorial or economic expansion.⁸

Chinese expansionism. Although China tries to pacify the international community about its growing power, its expansionist actions affirm the revisionist pursuit of its desire for hegemony. For the past few years, assertive Chinese policies in the Indo-Pacific region have



CIA map of China. (Map provided by author.)



We will need strong partnerships and alliances within the region. (Photo by LCpl Christian Robertson.)

challenged not only the territorial status quo but also the rule of international law in territorial disputes.⁹ In so doing, China strives to undermine the current international order and its underlying principles. For example, China escalated the East China Sea disputes by declaring an “air defense identification zone” over Japan’s Senkaku Islands in 2012 and by sending its fishing boats and powerful military forces into that area in 2016. In the South China Sea, the country has denied the Philippines access to the Scarborough Shoal and has drilled oil near the contested Parcel Islands while ignoring Vietnamese protests about its historical claims to the area.¹⁰ Moreover, in 2014, China reclaimed land near the seven reefs under Chinese control in the Spratly Islands. By turning these artificial islands into military bases, the country has established the foundation for control over the South China Sea, the primary pathway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans that carries about one-third of international maritime trade.¹¹ These actions demonstrate China’s disregard for international law and its willingness to proceed with its unilateral goals while intimidating other countries in the region. Such moves cannot only hinder U.S. alliances and partnerships but also reduce our capability to project influ-

ence in Asia. An emboldened China can also pursue its strategic interests outside the Indo-Pacific region as it continues to undermine U.S. dominance globally.¹²

Military modernization. Following the strategies of past hegemons, China is rapidly modernizing its military. China’s pursuit of hegemony replicates its behavior under the Qing imperial dynasty (established in 1636 and ruling China from 1644 to 1912), which

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conquered “all of modern Xinjiang, and Mongolia, and reached Tibet.”¹³ Accordingly, contemporary China proves that it still believes in expanding its influence through the use of military force. For instance, over the past few years, the country has not only increased the rate of its military spending but also reformed its military organizations. Furthermore, the country’s army has enforced the doctrine of anti-access/area denial, which limits the effectiveness of U.S. deployed forces.¹⁴ The country has built coast guard vessels to control

its maritime territory and improved its conventional ballistic missiles, which can threaten U.S. naval ports and airbases in the region as far as Andersen Air Force Base in Guam.¹⁵ To proceed with its plans for global hegemony, China opened its first military base in Djibouti in 2017, with the probable intentions of building more military bases on the East African coast.¹⁶ Therefore, such military modernization increases Chinese capabilities to constrain the efforts of not only the U.S. military but also the attempts of its allies and partners to maintain both a regional and global balance of power. Chinese expansionism and military modernization represent crucial matters of concern for the United States.

Recommended Actions

Containment represents the best strategy in preventing Chinese hegemony and convincing Beijing to change its behavior. The doctrine of containment was developed during the Cold War to counter Soviet Union efforts to increase its influence and spread communism outside its borders.¹⁷ Similarly, the United States can utilize such a strategy to alter China’s plans through strengthening alliances and developing new partnerships, as well as rebuilding its military forces.¹⁸

Strengthen alliances and develop new partnerships. A network of robust alliances and partnerships is required to sustain the U.S. military advantage in its long-term strategic competition with China. Acting as a revisionist power, China undermines the U.S. system of alliances and partnerships by either calling for a new “Asian security architecture” or trying to draw away U.S. allies, such as the Philippines and South Korea, by deliberately cultivating closer relationships with these countries.¹⁹ Thus, the United States should

enhance its efforts to reassure its allies and partners about its commitment to defend them against Chinese expansionism. For example, the United States can stop being neutral in the sovereignty disagreements in the South China Sea; it can help other states to reclaim their land, build military bases, and conduct joint military exercises, and it can sell them more sophisticated weapons to deter potential interventions. Such efforts will reinforce the ability of U.S. allies and partners to protect essential waterways and maritime chokepoints from Chinese incursions.

The United States may also negotiate new agreements with states in the region to possibly obtain access to the Itu Aba Island (under control of Taiwan), the Spratly Islands (under control of Vietnam), and the Thitu Island (under control of the Philippines).²⁰ Such moves by the United States should pressure China to choose between its pursuit of hegemony and possible conflict against a strengthened U.S. alliance in Asia. Moreover, India could become a new powerful partner for the United States in balancing China within the Indo-Pacific hemisphere. India's trust deficit with China because of its relationship with Pakistan, its defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian war, continuing border conflicts, and the rivalry over limited natural resources also challenges the stability of the region.²¹ Thus, a strong relationship with India would be ideal in the pursuit of containment.

Rebuild military forces. To supplement the first recommended action, the United States must rebuild its military forces to improve its warfighting readiness and sustain its global influence. Containment does not necessitate the war against China; nevertheless, "war is always a possibility."²² Therefore, improved war preparedness can either assist the United States in its strategy of containment or prevail in the case of a potential war. Similar to China, the United States should undertake a major military modernization program.²³ For example, among many priorities, the modernization of its nuclear forces can help counter the aggressor's coercive strategies based on the threatened use of nuclear weapons or strategic non-nu-

clear attacks. The further advancement of command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance network systems can also hinder the Chinese anti-access/area denial military strategy. In other words, while rebuilding its military capabilities, the United States not only reassures its allies and partners about the durability of its military primacy but also prevents China from further seeking hegemony. Increased investment in the buildup of U.S. military forces in the region can also benefit the strategy of containment and persuade Beijing to alter its current geopolitical course.

Conclusion

This analysis, from the perspective of defense, discusses concerns and recommends courses of action regarding the current state of the U.S.-China relations. A rising China strives for both regional and global hegemony through its expansionism and military modernization. The best course of action in such circumstances is a strategy of containment. The United States also needs to be aware that China not only denies the revisionist classification but also argues that the country defends its regional status quo from the United States threatening posture.²⁴ Thus, to reduce the Thucydidean risks in the long-term strategic competition with China, the United States must improve its understanding of how China's policymakers view their country's position in the world as well as its core national interests.

Notes

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