

Just who's afraid of China?

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For years, American strategists tended to underestimate the challenge that China poses to America in Asia. They put their faith in what seemed a simple and foolproof mechanism. The more China's power grew, they assumed, the more other Asian countries would come to fear it and welcome tough US action to counterbalance China and keep it in its box. This would impose a kind of automatic limit to China's regional influence: as its military power grew, its political and diplomatic clout relative to the US would fall.

But it has not worked that way. During the past five years, as China's military power has grown rapidly, its political and diplomatic influence has grown even faster. Beijing has mounted a sustained diplomatic offensive aimed precisely at easing regional fears of China's growing power.

The success of this diplomacy has been startling. Helped, of course, by the immense gravitational pull of its economic boom, Beijing has largely eliminated the negatives in its relationships with every country in the Western Pacific. Australia has been very much part of this pattern. The only exception - though a crucial one - is Japan.

As a result, Washington has woken up to the uncomfortable reality that an increasingly well-armed China might also be accepted as an economic and even political leader in Asia. That poses a real challenge to American primacy, which matters a lot in Washington. Sustaining primacy in Asia is one of America's top long-term strategic objectives.

So America is fighting back by trying to encourage Asians to be more worried by China's growing military power. Last year in Singapore, US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld took aim at China's military modernisation, and this month he did it again. His line is that Beijing has not properly explained what its growing forces are for and, without such explanations, China's Asian neighbours should be worried about them.

Is he right? Well, it is certainly true that China's military capability is growing, and changing shape in very significant ways. Until recently, China's military was overwhelmingly focused on big, crude land forces designed to fight the Soviet Union. Now it is focused on modern, high-tech air and naval forces. It is buying submarines with modern missiles and torpedoes, new warships with anti-aircraft radars and missiles, and combat aircraft suited to maritime strikes.

There is no doubt that all this makes China a more formidable maritime power than it has been in many centuries. And maritime power is what matters in Asia, especially for the US, whose strategic position in Asia is based on its traditional naval and air domination of the Western Pacific. It also matters to Japan, Australia and much of South-East Asia, whose security requires the protection of their island territories and seaborne trade from maritime threats.

But Rumsfeld is stretching it a lot when he says we do not know what China's forces are for. In fact, it's plain why China has been building up its forces, as the Pentagon itself concedes in its annual report to Congress on China's military power, published last month. Since the US sent carriers to the waters around Taiwan in 1996, China's military build-up has been primarily focused on ways to increase the costs and risks to Washington of doing the same again in a Taiwan crisis.

Beijing has been buying the ships, submarines, aircraft and other systems to enable it to attack the kind of forces, especially aircraft carriers, that Washington might send against China in a conflict over Taiwan. And there is not much doubt that it has succeeded, at least up to a point.

But China's growing maritime power may make a conflict over Taiwan less likely. The most probable spark for a crisis would be a miscalculated move towards independence by Taiwan's leaders, acting under a false assumption that American military supremacy would deter any Chinese military move. The stronger China's forces, the less likely Taipei is to make that mistake and the less likely we are to see a conflict.

Of course, China's maritime build-up probably has long-term aims beyond Taiwan. One is security for its trade, especially energy imports. China depends heavily on sea lines of communications to suppliers and customers and, unlike Japan, South Korea and Australia, it cannot rely on the US to help protect them. China does not yet seem to have worked out how to respond.

But again, actions by China to secure its sea lines of communication are not necessarily destabilising. China's many trade partners - including Australia - have an interest in the security of China's seaborne trade just as much as China does.

Is there nothing to fear, then, from China's growing maritime power? I would not go that far. China might be building its forces to deter Taiwan and protect its trade, but those forces will, over time, provide China with a substantial capacity to intimidate and, if necessary, to attack countries throughout Asia. Nothing in China's foreign policy gives good reason to worry that it will use its power in that way. But nothing guarantees that it will not. We simply do not know.

And it is no use for Rumsfeld to demand that China tell us their plans. They do not know what the future holds any more than we do. Like the rest of us, they are hoping for the best and preparing for the worst.

The only alternative is to find a way to step back from the strategic competition that is growing so relentlessly between China and the US. One good start would be for Rumsfeld to stop trying to scare America's Asian friends with dark hints of a China threat. Washington cannot sustain its primacy in Asia by trying to make China look bad. That risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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