

Meeting China's Military Challenge



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For six decades, America's military strength has helped preserve a relatively stable Asia-Pacific environment. However, in recent years Beijing has rapidly modernized its military with aspirations of supplanting the U.S.'s position. If present trends continue, China's growing capabilities may help it win a bloodless victory so the regional balance of power tilts in Beijing's favor as it is increasingly able to deter U.S. forces from entering the region, coerce neighboring states, or—should conflict ensue—win a rapid victory.

In response, the U.S. needs a long-term military and diplomatic effort that helps develop new methods and capabilities for operating in the Western Pacific while simultaneously strengthening alliances and enhancing new relationships in the region. For its part, Congress must reject an "instant-pudding" mindset that looks only at current problems while failing to adequately plan and then provide resources for our strategy. Endless continuing resolutions,

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the defense cuts in last summer's Budget Control Act and the "sequestration" process that essentially gambled away our defense budget for political purposes are signs of a budgeting process that is ill-prepared for use in managing the challenges China will pose in the decades ahead.

Numerous American analysts closely observing China's navy have concluded that Beijing aims to develop its own "Monroe Doctrine" in the Western Pacific, the ultimate goal being America's expulsion from the region. Capabilities to achieve this objective include precision-guided land-attack and anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, anti-satellite weapons, diesel submarines and cyberwarfare initiatives. If China is successful, strategists worry that smaller states such as Singapore or the Philippines could have their freedom of action neutralized by China's growing control, suffering a fate similar to Finland during the Cold War. If this develops, Beijing could more easily draw America's allies and partners into its orbit, preventing the U.S. from protecting its regional interests.

While China's desire to assert its role as a rising power is consistent with its national aspirations, many states question Beijing's assertions that it will only act defensively when it develops offensive strike platforms like those described here. And question they should.

In response, the U.S. must adopt a two-pronged approach that does not just look ahead to the next year or two, but carefully plans for the next several decades. First, we must recognize that the best way to avoid great-power conflict is to remain vigilantly prepared. The Pentagon has rightfully developed an AirSea Battle concept that attempts to address this challenge institutionally, conceptually and materially. To be successful, Congress must forge a partnership with the Pentagon to properly support AirSea Battle requirements. At its highest level, we will need to maintain a fleet with an adequate number of aircraft carriers, attack submarines and surface combatants. We will also require new technologies to project power from our aircraft carriers, extend our anti-ship missiles' ranges and distribute capabilities across a range of unmanned platforms.

If we intend to sustain an American-led, liberal-international order in the region, the second thing we must do is commit to a robust diplomatic effort. Maintaining relationships in the region has never been more important. Our allies are situated at critical strategic locations, offering their own capabilities to protect vital shipping lanes or working alongside our forces to deter disruptions.

In Japan, South Korea, Singapore and now Australia, we also maintain a military presence that allows us to sustain a regional posture and avoid the tyranny of distance we face when projecting power from our own shores. Congress must carefully review the proper balance of our forward-deployed military assets and recognize the critical role they play in reassuring our allies and friends. Going forward, we must further deepen existing alliances while developing new relationships with emerging regional players like Indonesia, India, Malaysia and Vietnam.

While the news is often focused on Beijing's aggression toward American surveillance ships or efforts to bully our allies in the East or South China seas, we must not lose our focus on the trends that will define the decades ahead. The Obama administration is right to shift our national security focus toward the Asia-Pacific region, but I fear the president's new budget will fail to properly provide for this effort. Congress has a responsibility to underpin our Asia-Pacific diplomatic long-game with an American military that remains the preeminent force in the region. ☉