

Embracing Chinese Global Security Ambitions

Three warships sailed through the Straits of Malacca in December last year, en route to a milestone in recent Chinese military history. Joining the United Nations-backed international naval force in the Gulf of Aden, China sought to protect its global economic interests with military power for the first time. It is not, however, Beijing's only step toward a more proactive security policy beyond the Strait of Taiwan. China is gradually paving the way for a more prominent presence as a global military player by strategizing, training, and modernizing its military hardware.

The United States has sent ambivalent signals about this evolution. In its most recent report to Congress, the Pentagon elaborated extensively on China's global "military engagement," but left open the question of whether this shift will allow Beijing "to contribute cooperatively to the international community's responsibilities" or whether it will "project power to ensure access to resources or enforce claims to disputed territories."¹ The United States combines concern with China's growing military strike capacity, in case of a confrontation over Taiwan, with the expectation that Beijing could soon assume more responsibility against a wide range of non-traditional threats, such as piracy and terrorism. Rather than a threat, Washington should grasp it as an opportunity. From the piracy-prone Indian Ocean to the failed states of Africa to the terror belt of South Asia, common interests are strong enough reasons to invest in cooperation. If the United States wants to be reliable global leader, it needs to have reliable partners.

Jonathan Holslag is a Research Fund Flanders fellow at the Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies (BICCS). He can be reached at jholslag@vub.ac.be. He would like to thank Bates Gill, David Shambaugh, Yan Xuetong, Wang Yiwei, Gudrun Wacker, Larry Wortzel, and Pan Zhonqi for their helpful suggestions and insights.

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Global security cooperation with China poses two challenges. On one hand, Beijing will continue to neglect the U.S. invitation to cooperate as long as Washington is continuing to boost Taiwan's military power. The Obama administration should therefore pursue a policy of restraint and give a clear signal to China that it will not supply major arms systems to Taiwan as long as relations across the Strait continue to improve and the mainland refrains from military muscle flexing. On the other hand, the United States needs to be sensitive to concerns of allies such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea who might see closer cooperation with China, particularly if it appears to prioritize it over Taiwan, at the expense of their strategic interests.

The way out of this dilemma is *inclusive balancing*. Engaging Asia should not be a matter of choosing between being with or against China. Washington needs to engage all regional powers simultaneously in a pragmatic multilateral framework that is based on cooperation among equals. Sustained U.S. leadership in Asia will depend on the extent to which it succeeds in converting local ambitions into synergy, while at the same time maintaining the checks and balances between the regional powers. How can Washington achieve this delicate balance?

China's Global Ambitions

As a vast continental state, China's traditional security strategy has always been oriented toward protecting its long, unstable borders. As MIT professor Taylor Fravel rightly concludes in an earlier article in *The Washington Quarterly* that China's national security in essence will continue to be identified with safeguarding its territorial sovereignty, reunification with Taiwan, maintaining internal stability, and curbing intrusion by other great powers into its periphery. As a developing country facing an uphill battle against social and political fragmentation, China will continue to limit the costs of military force projection as long as it is able to thrive on the global market. China is also aware that it needs time to develop substantial expeditionary capacity to engage in long-term distant operations.²

This persistent strategic conservatism, however, will not prevent Beijing from addressing new security threats that emerge as a consequence of its growing international presence. As China continues transforming into a trading nation with global ambitions, its national security interests are becoming globalized too. "We must continue our enhanced participation in economic globalization and at the same time conscientiously safeguard national economic security," President Hu Jintao stressed at a Central Committee meeting in 2007. He also stated: "We need to build effective national economic security systems, early warning, crisis response and the capacity to protect our interests and the safety of our citizens abroad."³ China's development has arrived at an important stage where its initial

reluctance to project military force will start to make way for a gradually more assertive use of military capabilities in its foreign policies.

China is becoming increasingly aware of the security implications of its growing economic presence in overseas markets.⁴ The vulnerability of its maritime connections with

Africa and the Middle East has attracted attention at all levels of China's military and political elite. A new concern, widely covered by Chinese news media, is that Chinese workers abroad fall prey to violence more often. While large-scale incidents such as the anti-Chinese pogroms in Indonesia in the late 1990s, during which many Chinese migrants were killed and property was looted or burned, have not recurred, *sinophobia* is on the rise.

In developing countries, Chinese immigrants are accused of stealing jobs and are targeted by opposition groups for siding with discriminative political elites. For the same reason, Chinese facilities were targeted in poor and unstable states such as Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Sudan. Such incidents have been increasing in the last five years, and merge organized crime with political motives. In 2008 alone, at least eight Chinese trailers and freighters were reported to have been attacked in the eastern and western parts of the Indian Ocean. While China has actively nurtured its political partnerships across the world, it is not always able to turn global public attitudes in its favor. Anti-government rebellion and *sinophobia*, often combined with a weak economy, now prove to be a main obstacle for China's charm offensive.⁵ When violence escalates in unstable states, the outsiders, usually stable states, end up in an awkward and vulnerable position.

The initial response of Beijing has been to withdraw or to request the support of local governments. While evacuation in case of calamities might be appropriate for the personal security of compatriots, it is not suitable for China's long-term economic interests. "We cannot run away all the time, and it is a wrong signal anyway," admitted an official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Beijing also derides the option of hiring locals to do the work instead.⁶ "Rather than withdrawing workers safely or replacing them, China will need to develop the capability to keep its workers safely in unstable countries," a colleague at the Ministry of Commerce adds.⁷ Jin Canrong, a scholar at Renmin University, sees the current "diplomacy for the people" as a "start in a gradual process that will further evolve with the development of China's overall national strength."⁸

China increasingly acknowledges that its free ride is over, and that it will have to invest more in the protection of its economic interests. The debate about how to protect foreign interests with military means is only starting to take place. Ma Xiaojun of the International Institute of Strategic Studies of the Central Party

China's national security interests are becoming globalized.

The PLA is preparing for integrated long-distance operations and blue-water patrolling.

School summarizes this predicament very clearly: it is the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens, and China is now confronted with a dilemma between its principle of non-interference and the interests that derive from its national development.⁹

Experts and officials invoke four main arguments in favor of a more proactive security policy. First, the economic

competition from developed nations has compelled China to look for investment opportunities in unstable parts of the world, particularly in oil drilling and contract labor in sub-Saharan African and South Asia. Second, China is no longer expected to stand aloof when violence erupts. Given its status as an aspiring great power, while national governments with which it does business automatically ask for military aid and the international community requests mediation or sanctions, keeping a low profile—the traditional maxim of China’s diplomacy—is no longer tenable. Third, Beijing recognizes that passing the buck to regional organizations or other powers is not an option. During a roundtable in Beijing in 2007, a group of senior military officers concluded that not only are these players incapable of delivering, but relying on other countries with their own interests would be strategically irresponsible.¹⁰ Finally, Chinese experts reckon that China should not rely on the United States or other regional powers for its security. While coordination is desirable, it cannot take for granted that these actors would refrain from containing China in the future.

China, therefore, is modifying its posture on foreign security challenges. In a 2007 report from the Development Research Center of the State Council, two senior researchers of the State Council’s study department categorized non-traditional threats as a strategic economic challenge and pleaded for including a series of new measures in the national security strategy, according to China’s position as an “influential world power.”¹¹ After the lethal attack on a Chinese oil facility in Ethiopia in April 2007, *China Daily* asserted: “China needs to consider new channels to protect overseas interests.” The article stressed that: “China must break through traditional diplomatic thinking . . . Only to rely on the traditional mode of high-level political contacts, only ‘peaceful coexistence’ and ‘mutually beneficial cooperation’ or the principle of self-restraint are insufficient to protect ourselves or to safeguard overseas economic interests and development.”¹²

In a July 2008 *Xinhua* article, experts went beyond this idea of self-defense, emphasizing that cooperation on asymmetric threats is also desirable for China’s international prestige but cannot be taken for granted. “Self-restraint does not

work anymore,” it concluded, “China should develop its capabilities faster and show that while it becomes stronger, it does not threaten others, but rather contributes to a stable world.”¹³

This growing awareness has had an impact on Chinese armed forces. Since 2004, China’s political leadership has instructed the military to prepare to protect its growing stakes abroad. In a speech before an expanded session of the Central Military Commission on December 24, 2004, Hu highlighted the protection of China’s “expanding national interests” as an “historic mission.” In December 2006, a plenary meeting of the Central Committee had decided that “China should integrate various means: political, economic, intelligence, military” in response to security threats to China’s foreign interests.¹⁴ This request triggered two important developments in the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) planning: the emergence of integrated long-distance operations, and acceleration in the construction of a blue-water navy.

Integrated Long-Distance Operations

The 2006 White Paper on National Defense posited that: “The Army aims at moving from regional defense to trans-regional mobility, and improving its capabilities in air-ground integrated operations, *long-distance maneuvers*, rapid assaults and special operations.”¹⁵ Two years later, Hu confirmed that the army should improve its capability to deal with a multitude of traditional and non-traditional threats and, among others, “prepare for non-war military operations.”¹⁶ At a conference on non-war military operations in Beijing in 2007, it became evident that non-traditional military operations are gaining prominence in China’s security thinking when four types of missions were distinguished: disaster relief, enforcement action, peacekeeping operations, and military operations.¹⁷ In order to facilitate such missions, Beijing has approved an ambitious plan to boost its strategic lift platforms. “Mobility and flexibility are key for addressing new challenges,” PLA analyst Wang Hong She wrote: “A policy should be implemented to combine domestic development and acquisition of large military aircraft, transport helicopters and large landing ships to enhance our military’s three-dimensional mobility.”¹⁸

As a consequence, the military is gearing its equipment for long-range power projection. China currently uses civilian airliners to fly its soldiers in when it participates in humanitarian operations, peacekeeping missions, or large-scale maneuvers. China’s current airlift capacity is limited to about 150 domestically produced Y-8 turboprop aircraft with a maximum payload of 20 tons, 14 Russian Il-76 jet transport aircraft with a capacity of 45 tons, and a number of smaller and older planes. Despite hard bargaining, Beijing is still hoping to buy an additional batch of 34 Il-76 and four Il-78 refueling tankers, which would substantially increase China’s long-range airlift capacity.¹⁹ At the same time,

China is investing massively in developing its own large long-range aircraft.²⁰ Shaanxi Aircraft Industry and Antonov are designing a Military Heavy Airlifter with a payload of at least 100 tons. Another consortium is drafting the blue print for an indigenous jumbo passenger aircraft. Both types are due to be completed by 2020.

Besides airlift, China also seeks to deploy troops by sea. In 2007, it commissioned the Type-071 landing platform dock. This is the first vessel that has all the features for lifting a small battalion-size unit to distant theaters. Experts believe that more long-range amphibious ships are under consideration and that studies were prepared for the construction of a larger helicopter carrier and an aircraft carrier. These plans should be linked to new projects that were recently launched to build a new generation of transport helicopters. An article in *Military Science* revealed that by 2020, a new generation of medium and large transport helicopters would be commissioned, apart from a new advanced attack helicopter.²¹ China's long-range mobility will also be increased by introducing several types of light armored vehicles, such as the EQ-2058 multi-utility vehicle and the WZ-0001 8x8 wheeled armored fighting vehicle.

At least two recent large military training operations have showed that the Chinese government is recognizing future scenarios of military long-range deployment in hostile areas. In 2007, Six Il-76 aircraft simulated deployment of armored vehicles, combat units, engineers, and transport helicopters to Western Siberia, while being refueled in air.²² In 2008, an operation was launched that simulated combat units disembarking from military and civilian aircraft while establishing a security perimeter in violent conditions.²³ In 2008, the Central Military Council launched its Military Training and Examination Program, aimed at developing new theories and guidelines to enhance non-war operations with "long-range rapid mobility" and "joint combat capability in hostile environments."²⁴

As a consequence of the "diversification of military operations," the Chinese ground forces are also going through a new stage of reform in command, equipment, and training. The most recent innovation in the Chinese army's organization is the introduction of battalion-sized battle groups. These groups combine several arms of the same brigade, such as infantry, engineering, army aviation, and reconnaissance. Their command is based on the *pei shu* principle, leaving more autonomy and flexibility to smaller units. Maneuvers at the battle group level have become a standard practice at the training center for peacekeeping operations. The reorganization of its ground forces into smaller and more flexible units, combined with specific training and developing various logistic platforms, will allow the PLA to deploy several battle groups in low-intensity conflicts abroad in 10 to 15 years.

Heading for the High Seas

With 90 percent of its trade transported by sea, and a strong dependence on the piracy-infested waters of Africa and South Asia, top leaders have repeatedly stressed the importance of developing a blue-water navy. In 2005, the State Council concluded that becoming a maritime power does not only involve strengthening maritime transport, but also building a powerful navy to protect the national merchant fleet.²⁵ In 2006, Hu called for building “a powerful navy,” and while visiting the new navy base at Hainan two years later, he stated that the navy should modernize faster and that it should prepare itself for a growing number of tasks.

The participation of the Chinese navy in the international maritime operation along the coast of Somalia formed the first modest showcase of its rapidly modernizing fleet. The two destroyers of the type 052-B and -C both show advanced propulsion, radar, communication, and weapon systems.²⁶ The type 051-C Luzhou class destroyers are able to engage six airborne targets simultaneously beyond 80 kilometers.²⁷ The type 054A frigates’ air defense system allows tracing 40 targets simultaneously at a maximum range of 120 kilometers.²⁸ New long-range subsonic type YJ-62 missiles are able to target ships at a distance up to 280 kilometers and have an anti-jamming and guidance system that outperforms most other anti-ship missiles. These surface combatants are backed up by a new generation of supply ships. China is launching its new types of ships only in small numbers, allowing it to experiment with new technologies, and to steadily replace the mainly Russian systems with domestically engineered alternatives.

Apart from the mission in the Indian Ocean, the navy’s presence beyond the adjacent seas has remained limited. Despite its participation in humanitarian aid and peacekeeping operations, it has never used military sealift capacity for such missions. Without a doubt, the navy will continue to concentrate on the Taiwan Strait as well as the East and South China Sea. As it gains military clout, it might even become more assertive enforcing its claims in the region, for instance by stepping up its naval presence to allow more Chinese fishers and exploration activities into disputed areas. China is also gradually expanding its naval security perimeter eastwards. In official statements, the Western Pacific is increasingly interpreted as China’s maritime zone of influence.²⁹ There is also more and more support for a sustained naval presence in the Indian Ocean. One of the leading strategic thinkers at the National Defense University asked: “It is understandable that many countries develop military power along such sea routes: Why can the Chinese people not be tolerated in the Indian Ocean?”³⁰

China is now confronted with a dilemma with its principle of non-interference.

Chinese experts and officials declare that in the next five years, the navy will expand its range of operations beyond the Strait of Malacca, and that it will do so in the context of multilateral operations, port calls, joint exercises, and military partnerships with countries in Africa and South Asia.

Common Interests

As China's economic stakes in the world grow, so do its security interests, and the political willingness to protect them. As a consequence, Beijing is gradually shifting a part of its military capabilities in the direction of long-range operations. Nowadays, its Air Force and Navy would both be able to lift a small battalion-size contingent for long-range operations. Without having to overstretch its capacity in the East and South China Sea, the navy is able to deploy two formations of two or three advanced surface combatants accompanied by a replenishment ship for missions in distant waters. In terms of long-distance force projection, China ranks between India and Japan, and it will take at least ten years before it will be able to operate at brigade-level. While the global presence of China's armed forces will continue to rise, it will only be at a slow pace.

This does not pose a threat to the United States. From a realist perspective, China's military venturing into remote parts of the world remains vulnerable. If in the next decade, the PLA's military predominance in the Taiwan Strait becomes insurmountable, its relative weakness in distant operations gives the United States a tremendous amount of new leverage, as long as it remains at strategic choke points. Despite China's global military ambitions, the United States will continue to have sufficient clout to keep this in check. From China's perspective, it makes cooperation compulsory.

And why should China not work with the United States? Both powers have many security interests in common. Maritime piracy is an obvious example. Collaboration on energy security can be explored as well, given shared concerns about violence in areas such as the Gulf of Guinea and eastern Africa. The United States should also seriously consider the added value of working with China in stabilizing Afghanistan/Pakistan. The province of Badakhshan in Afghanistan and the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) in Pakistan are breeding grounds for terrorist groups that target both U.S. troops and China's autonomous region of Xinjiang. An escalation of the situation in the region will severely hamper a U.S. exit strategy.

In many other failing states, China and the United States can share the burden of transforming unorganized government militias into regular armies. Such synergies would also be relevant as a test of China as a responsible power aiming for cooperation and peace. Peaceful rise in essence requires being cooperative. At the same time, an offer by the United States to work with China

and respect national interests on an equal footing strips Beijing of the arguments for refusing cooperation, making it more difficult to confront the United States under the traditional antihegemonic pretext. Confidence could also be improved by getting accustomed to China's tactical and strategic military thinking, its operational procedures, and military technologies. U.S.–China military cooperation across the world is thus an important litmus test for the emerging power to show its true nature.

It is widely recognized that for various economic, diplomatic, and security reasons, the U.S.–China partnership is inevitable. Bringing in the military dimension can make this relationship even more robust and stable. The wider the scope, the more options for trade-offs between different sectors of cooperation. Setbacks in one sector can be mitigated by continuing to move forward in others.

Easing one security dilemma with China might thus foster others in the region.

Inclusive Balancing: the Key Strategy

The United States has recognized that cooperation is the best solution. In December of 2008, the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) Gen. Timothy Keating expressed his hope “to work closely” with the Chinese Navy in counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and offered to share intelligence.³¹ Earlier that year, PACOM invited the PLA to explore a coordinated response to future humanitarian disasters in Asia. For the first time, Chinese military observers attended the Cobra Gold exercise in Thailand. By inviting China, the United States confirmed its earlier promulgated objective to encourage China “to play a constructive, peaceful role” and “to serve as a partner in addressing common security challenges.”³²

Beijing, however, has been reluctant to accept such invitations by the United States. While it sent a top-ranked general for the first time to the U.S.–China Strategic Dialogue in January 2008, and agreed to step up exchanges at various levels, it minimized interaction almost immediately after the Pentagon announced its new arms deal with Taiwan in October 2008. A call to Beijing by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia David Sedney in December 2008 failed to immediately bring the top Chinese military generals to the negotiating table. When they did arrive, they did so with many reservations. The expected interaction between both navies in eastern Africa also ended in disappointment for the Pentagon.

China obviously blames Washington's ambivalence. “America is reaching out one hand to us, while supporting our arch-enemy with the other,” an expert at

Helping stabilize failing states would be relevant as a test of China as a responsible power.

the Chinese Defense University asserted.³³ Even the most moderate voices in China's security community decry the recent \$6.5 billion package to Taiwan. "It was less than the Taiwanese government asked for, but as the decision came at a moment when cross-strait relations were steadily improving, we cannot but conclude that America wants to contain China in spite of its amicable statements," an influential security

expert stated.³⁴ The Chinese military is not willing to reach out to the United States as long as it backs the Taiwanese armed forces, whereas the United States will stick to its unsinkable aircraft carrier if China's military does not open up. As long as this security dilemma over Taiwan persists, Washington should not expect that Beijing is going to turn its global military strategy into a cooperative one.

To mitigate this security dilemma, the United States needs to show restraint in providing military support to Taiwan, as long as relations with the mainland continue to improve. It can afford to do so because it does not need Taiwan as a military balancer. As posited earlier, it can prevent peaceful development turning into an aggressive rise by maintaining a supreme position along China's economic lifelines. This does not imply that the Taiwanese people are left to the mercy of Beijing. This just implies that deterrence becomes symbolically less sensitive, though just as effective.

At the same time, Washington needs to be attentive to concerns of countries such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea. Distrust of China's modernizing armed forces is mounting, and they will see closer cooperation with the United States being done at the expense of their own strategic interests. The Indian military has already reacted negatively to Washington's support for the Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Japan fears that allowing China's military to expand its clout in the Western Pacific threatens its own maritime corridors and might embolden Beijing to exert military pressure in the East China Sea dispute. Even Moscow is now prioritizing refurbishing its military presence in the Russian Far East. Easing one security dilemma might thus foster another.

Washington needs to engage all four regional powers simultaneously. Unlike counterbalancing, by using Taiwan as a forward fortress and fostering new alliances to contain China, inclusive balancing implies working with all the main players of the Asian system so that the multipolar order imposes sufficient costs to thwart military adventurism. Transcending different political systems, inclusive balancing seeks to give each player the scope to develop, resist military revisionism, address non-traditional threats, and protect an open trade system. Only such a posture will

permit Washington to foster truly strategic military cooperation with China and to avoid the high costs of traditional containment and confrontation while also reassuring its traditional allies.

Options for Cooperation

How should the United States proceed to advance global security cooperation and ease the security dilemma? The first step is to foster common understanding about global security challenges. Both sides should clarify common approaches, departing from long-term interests, which include maintaining security in unstable states, assisting states that are the victims of severe humanitarian crises, and maintaining regional organizations to strengthen their efforts at mediation. At the same time, these premises should be applied to different geographic areas such as Africa and Southeast Asia, as well as individual problem states such as Congo, Myanmar, and North Korea, to name a few. Such a consensus should be intellectually prepared by promoting better coordinated joint research between universities and think tanks, and by stepping up similar exchanges between military academies, intelligence experts, and diplomacy schools.

The subsequent step is to lift the output of this exercise up to the political level and gradually develop common positions and common action. A large number of dialogues is by no means a guarantee for success. In the past years, the international community has seen a proliferation of official dialogues, used more therapeutically as confidence-building measures than for delivering tangible outcomes. To some extent this is also the case with strategic dialogues, of which six have been held. It is, therefore, a matter of learning from past experiences and making official exchanges more output-oriented. Yet, in the field of security, an institutional framework for high-level exchanges is still missing. A strategic military dialogue is essential to explore joint initiatives to tackle global security challenges. Once this bilateral framework is put in place, it should be embedded in a proactive dialogue with other Asian powers. Not a bilateral but a multilevel security framework should boost coordination at the tactical and strategic level. It will prove to be a vital vehicle for inclusive balancing in an age of uncertainty.

At the operational military level, the Pentagon needs to continue with what it calls “drawing the Chinese military out.”³⁵ Washington should maintain a military dialogue and a hot line between both countries’ defense departments and navies. There are additional options to be explored. Chinese liaison officers should be invited to U.S. operations in Africa, central Asia, and to NATO headquarters. Military professors and instructors should be exchanged between military academies or training centers. China is already working with foreign instructors in its peacekeeping training center near Beijing. UN missions should be actively seized to enhance interoperability. There is nothing that should

Beijing has been reluctant to accept U.S. invitations to military cooperation.

prevent the fifth and seventh fleet from staging joint patrols along the sea lanes in Southeast Asia and around Africa. Again, such ventures also need to be developed into collective efforts by the major Asian countries.

High expectations call for much patience. Inevitably, easing the cross-strait dilemma will be an incremental tit-for-tat process. While both sides continue to

proceed with it, China will have to make its sluggish military bureaucracy better organized to engage in a more enduring and comprehensive collaboration.

You Can't Beat 'em, so Join 'em . . .

China's growing global economic interests are compelling China to extend the horizons of its security policies and its military strategizing. Slowly but determinedly, it will project its military might into distant regions. Already, the PLA is preparing for integrated long-distance operations and blue-water patrolling. The United States should continue to anticipate China's global security ambitions.

Recognizing the many common interests, China has to be considered as a partner rather than a rival, and options for cooperation need to be explored. Yet, a genuine strategic military partnership will be impossible without tackling the security dilemmas that exist between the two powers over Taiwan, and regarding other Asian powers that fear an aggressive neighbor in the future without support from their distant ally. Washington should address this quandary with the strategy of inclusive balancing. While maintaining the necessary regional checks and balances, this approach will oblige China to show its true intentions, while preventing China from hiding behind a "containment complex." Only after this is achieved will the way for securing the world and effectively dealing with challenges ahead be opened.

Notes

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