Why Pick a Fight With China?

By Walter C. Clemens, Jr

US policymakers note that China in March announced plans to raise its defense budget by 11.2 percent, while Chinese officials maintain that defense spending has declined as a share of GDP in the last three years. *People's Daily* says Washington’s ‘return to Asia’ strategy is ‘causing disturbance in China and neighboring countries.’ Beijing denies it is competing militarily with the US or Europe.

Walter Clemens suggests that both sides should restrain their arms buildup and instead accentuate the positive — their shared interests in sustainable development.

HAVING ACHIEVED LITTLE and lost much in Iraq and Afghanistan, the White House and Pentagon in 2012 turn their focus to the Asia-Pacific region. Top US leaders seem to believe that the world’s oldest major democracy must confront the world’s oldest civilization and most populous country. Washington orphans engagement and upgrades containment. A tough line toward China may buttress President Barack Obama’s prospects in the November elections, but it could also jeopardize long-term US and world security. Washington risks becoming trapped in a self-fulfilling policy. Expecting and preparing for a confrontation with China, US policies may push China to the very behaviors Washington would like to prevent and toward a collision that no sane person could welcome.

Obama explained the new orientation in US foreign policy to the Australian Parliament on Nov. 17, 2011: “As we plan and budget for the future, we will allocate the resources necessary to maintain our strong military presence in this region.” While administration officials insist that this new policy is not aimed specifically at China, the implication is clear enough: From now on, the primary focus of US military strategy will not be the once fertile crescent or the global “war on terrorism” but China.

K. Shanmugam, the foreign minister of Washington’s long-time partner, Singapore, warned in February that US domestic pressures and election pressures “have resulted in some anti-China rhetoric in domestic debates. Americans should not underestimate the extent to which such rhetoric can spark reaction which can create a new and unintended reality for the region.”

Here we have a classic security dilemma: the US sees China modernizing its armed forces and decides it must beef up US assets across the Pacific Ocean. In response, China believes it must do still more to counter the US buildup. The pattern of action and counteraction could come to resemble the US-Soviet arms race — dangerous, expensive, and, some would say, pointless.

In recent years many US analysts have told Washington policy-makers to prepare for the rise of a more aggressive China and the end of a unipolar world. Alarmed by China’s rise, some believers in America’s decline call for retrenchment to a Fortress America in economics and world affairs. Instead of free trade, they urge a neo-mercantilist stance. Instead of leadership for peace and stability, they call for the US to limit its military and political presence around the globe. Hawks go the other way. They demand a military buildup to contain China. Both perspectives are ill advised. Neither the retreatists nor the hawks see the world as it is.

Both declinists and hard-liners worry that if China’s torrid economic growth continues, its gross domestic product (GDP) will exceed America’s in several decades. Rising powers, they warn, clash with declining hegemons. They note that Beijing brashly makes extensive claims in the South China Sea; that China continues to advance in space and other technologies with military applications; and that its missiles menace Taiwan, a friend of America for more than 60 years.

None of these arguments holds. Water shortages, pollution and demographic problems will surely slow if not derail China’s rapid growth. Official Chinese estimates suggest the rate of growth will decline from 9 percent or 10 percent per annum to 7 percent in coming years. But a decline to 2 percent or 3 percent is a real possibility.

No matter the size of China’s GDP, per capita incomes in the country will remain low compared to those in Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and the West. The smog over Beijing became so thick in 2011 that many residents turned to the US Embassy for accurate reporting. As a result of the one-child policy, China within 20 years will have 300 million pensioners, causing the ratio of workers per retiree to plummet from 8 to 1 today to 2 to 1 by 2040. Taking care of pensioners by then could consume the country’s entire GDP.

Taking into account the many factors that shape the global balance of power, Harvard University scholar Michael Beckley reaches this conclusion: “Over the last two decades, globalization and US hegemonic burdens have expanded significantly, yet the United States has not declined; in fact it is now wealthier, more innovative and more militarily powerful compared to China than it was in 1991.” He notes, for example, that foreign firms produce more than 90 percent of China’s high-tech exports. There is even more foreign direct investment in China and fewer joint ventures in which technology is transferred.

The US is not declining relative to China or any other power. But assertions to this effect are dangerous, because — if believed — they could push Washington and Beijing onto a collision course. The good news is that wars between upstarts and declining hegemons have been rare. Yes, Imperial Germany challenged Great Britain before 1914, but World War I erupted for other reasons. The relatively peaceful implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991 shows that war between weakening great powers and their rivals is not inevitable. The Soviet Union in the 1980s concluded many arms control and other co-operative arrangements with the West. But the Communist system was sick and the Soviet empire disappeared without a whimper.

More “good” news: Given the lethality of modern weapons, war is almost unthinkable between major powers. China’s steady advances in military weaponry, beginning with a nuclear bomb in 1964, are impressive but not surprising for a country with millennia of technological innovation — and with long borders and vulnerable sea lanes to maintain.

Even better news: A combination of factors, both tangible and intangible, has reduced the frequency of big wars and the number of war deaths per capita. Images and news reports from Syria
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and from Tibet obscure the big picture, but the global trends are away from violence. For now, the large pot is calling the kettle black. Alarms in Washington about Chinese military spending are risible given the Pentagon’s well-funded programs to advance technology. As Obama reminded the American people, planned reductions in US defense spending would still give the Pentagon a budget larger than those of the next 10 biggest spenders combined. Leaving aside the outlays for Iraq and Afghanistan, US defense spending is at least eight times that of China. Despite pressures to cut US government expenditure, the riparian nations must negotiate to find ways to share the resources. As for Taiwan, its future remains uncertain but positive. The people of “island China” are learning how to tighten their business and other ties with Mainland China while retaining their de facto independence. They can probably take care of themselves without shows of force by the US Seventh Fleet. Proponents of “containing” China recall America’s triumph in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. America’s military programs, they say, not only deterred but also bankrupted the Soviet Union. Neither China’s posture toward Taiwan nor its treatment of human rights is likely to change because some US Marines are ensconced in Australia.

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tures, the US Navy will not reduce its 11 aircraft carrier groups to 10. For its part, China boasts just one refitted Ukrainian aircraft carrier that can move but is still not equipped to land airplanes. China is far more vulnerable to exogenous events than the US. China depends on imported commodities far more than America. China must increase its oil imports to cope with the demands of industry and a middle class addicted to private autos. The US, by contrast, is producing more of its own gas and oil and has neighbors in the Americas who want to sell the huge volumes of carbons being found in shale and deep waters. Some analysts believe that a US naval buildup could aim at a capacity to choke off China’s imports of oil and other supplies. But this would be an act of war — catastrophic for all parties.

Yes, China stridently claims huge parts of the South China Sea, but so do Vietnam and other neighboring nations. The Philippines seeks a stronger US presence to support its interests in the South China Sea. But surely any kind of military confrontation there will be counterproductive. Yes, nuclear weapons were useful to deter Soviet expansionism, but, at least since Mao Zedong, China’s leaders have shown no appetite for expanding beyond what they see as China’s historic borders. Since the late 1970s Beijing’s leaders have been sober and methodical — quite unlike Joseph Stalin or Nikita Khrushchev. Arms races divert valuable resources and accomplish little. The “father of the Soviet H-bomb,” Andrei D. Sakharov, estimated that a quarter of the Soviet GDP went to military purposes. Granted that the Soviet Union spent far too much of its resources on military activities, the Soviet regime collapsed due to internal rot — not, as some argue, to the pressure of President Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” program. The burden of defense on China’s growing economy is surely much less. China does not need aircraft carriers to neutralize the US presence at sea. Anti-ship missiles launched from submarines and other platforms will suffice. Meanwhile, the burden of defense for the US is greater than the officially reported 4 percent of GDP. To that number must be added outlays for intelligence, nuclear energy, outer space, veterans affairs, and — greater than any one of these — interest due on past military expenditures. All this brings the total to 7 or 8 percent of GDP — a reason why Washington should cut current defense outlays far more radically than now planned. The fact is that nothing on the table between Washington and Beijing is worth fighting for. Neither trade disputes nor intellectual property rights can be resolved by war. Americans may abhor China’s policies toward dissidents who challenge Communist rule and toward minorities such as Tibetans and Uighurs. But external pressures will not alter those policies. Neither China’s posture toward Taiwan nor its treatment of human rights is likely to change because some US Marines are ensconced in Australia. On the contrary, any signs that Washington wants to intimidate the Middle Kingdom will only sharpen nationalist and xenophobic tendencies.

On the contrary, any signs that Washington wants to intimidate the Middle Kingdom will only sharpen nationalist and xenophobic tendencies. A relaxation of tensions with the US would do more for freedom within China than confrontation. As happened in the Soviet Union but also in Taiwan, the authoritarian regime in China may some day be transformed, as one-party rule weakens the country’s capacity to cope with complex challenges. Without free access to information and free expression of divergent views, China will make more huge mistakes such as the Three Gorges Dam. Chinese leaders realize that free information flows are essential for commerce and science, but fear they will activate groundswells of dissent. For the long haul, however, repression is a losing strategy. One or two generations hence, China’s one-party system will come under great internal pressure to evolve into something like Taiwan’s multi-party democracy. There may be bumps on this road, perhaps even a replay of Tiananmen 1989, but even such events could push China toward accepting multiparty democracy. Singapore’s foreign minister gave Americans some sound advice when he visited Washington in February. They should not think about China in win-lose sporting terms, he said. Instead, they should understand that “the world and Asia are big enough to accommodate a rising China and a reinvigorated United States.”

The US and China are interdependent — linked so closely that they can help or hurt one another. Trade wars are possible but would be counterproductive. The free flow of goods and people benefits the US. (Some 90 percent of American PhDs from China remain part of the US workforce, helping to sustain the quality of higher education in the US and keep America at the forefront of technological innovation.) If American and Chinese leaders are smart, they will work to develop complementary interests. Both countries need clean energy, reliable food and water supplies, and better health care systems. Both need to reduce security threats from Northeast Asia (Korea) to South Asia (Pakistan). Neither Washington nor Beijing should act on the self-fulfilling expectation that conflict is inevitable. Each should do what it can to help all parties develop in harmony.

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