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China's Threat to the U.S. Is Exaggerated

by Ivan Eland
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The Pentagon's annual publication, "Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2009," accused China of stocking its military with weapons that can be used to intimidate or attack Taiwan and mitigate U.S. air and naval superiority near its territory. Even if the Department of Defense's report has not exaggerated the threat from China — unlikely since the department has an inherent conflict of interest in evaluating threats and building weapons to counter those threats — the report is good news.

You would never know it by the statement of Ike Skelton, Democratic Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who warned that "China's military budget continues a trend of double-digit increases and questions remain about China's strategic intentions."

Unfortunately, no questions exist about U.S. strategic intentions, even under a new more liberal president. The United States will seek to continue its military dominance of East Asia and the world and will seek to keep China contained by a system of bilateral alliances, military bases in East Asia, and far-forward military deployments — all left over from the Cold War.

In addition, the gap between U.S. and Chinese defense spending remains vast. The massive U.S. defense spending is equal to almost half the total defense expenditure for the entire world. Although China's defense spending has increased by double digits in recent years, this increase followed a period of slack spending and starts from a much lower base level than the gargantuan U.S. defense budget. U.S. yearly spending on defense is \$711 billion, whereas China's is only 17 percent of that at \$122 billion annually.

Furthermore, the U.S. military deploys far forward around China; China's general military forces do not deploy in the Western Hemisphere and do not threaten the United States. The most important finding in the Pentagon's report was that China could not deploy and sustain even small military units far away from its borders before 2015. The report continued that China would not be able to deploy and sustain large units in combat far away from China until well into the decade after that. Instead, the Pentagon concluded that China is modernizing its military for short conflicts around its borders. In other words, China's capability to project conventional power is and will remain pathetic far into the future — thus making most of China's neighbors relatively safe, and the faraway U.S. very safe, against a Chinese attack.

But what about Taiwan? Right now it is doubtful that China could conduct a successful amphibious invasion against Taiwan, which is an island. Island nations are easier to defend than other countries, because amphibious landings are one of the most difficult military operations to undertake. In Taiwan's case, it has a very good air force that could probably sink any Chinese amphibious force, because Chinese ships are deficient in good air defenses. The greatest threat to Taiwan would be Chinese intimidation or actual attack with a growing number of short-range ballistic missiles.

But the real question is whether Taiwan is strategic militarily to the United States. The small island nation is not, and the United States shouldn't risk escalation with a nuclear-armed China to defend it. Even as the Chinese military gets stronger, the rich Taiwanese can use a porcupine strategy. They don't have to be able to win a war with China; they just need to be able to inflict enough damage to dissuade China from invading or attacking.

In contrast, Taiwan is strategic to China, because any major foreign power with aircraft could transfer them to the island and have an offshore base to bomb China. Even though China has far fewer nuclear weapons than the United States, the Chinese are emotional about the Taiwan issue; thus, any nuclear showdown over the island would be fraught with risk.

Therefore, the United States should declare that it will no longer defend Taiwan and retract the American Navy's threat to China from U.S. forward bases and deployments in East Asia. Now that the Cold War is long over, these forward forces are not needed for U.S. security and are needlessly provocative to China. Such deployments and bases, and the U.S. containment policy toward China, contribute to the perceived Chinese need for double-digit defense budget increases. Thus, in a time of world economic meltdown, the U.S. could retract its expensive, unaffordable, and out-of-date empire and make its citizens safer at the same time.