

Response to PacNet #34 - China. There, I Said It.

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We appreciate “China. There, I Said It,” by Rep. Forbes (PacNet #34) and particularly enjoyed the title of the piece. Discussing China in anything less than a flattering light has become taboo. As the professors from the US Naval War College so amusingly pointed out, China has become a “Voldemort” like figure in many peoples’ minds. We also concur with his point that the 2012 China Military Power Report seems restrained. Others, such as Gabe Collins, [in “12 Things Missing from China Report”](#) have pointed out several interesting omissions.

However, we are still a bit unclear as to what Rep. Forbes wants instead. He states, “Writing about the need to speak more frankly about the nature of the competition will be deemed by some as unnecessarily provocative.” In our opinion, this is not what is unnecessarily provocative. What could be construed as provocative is raising this issue without also elaborating on: A) What specifically we are competing for; and B) If/how this rhetorical shift might influence actual US government actions?

The point is well taken that the United States absolutely needs to be cognizant of, and prepared for, any and all challenges that China may pose. But is he implying that if we don’t directly “call out” China using the dreaded “C-word” – “Competitor” – that we’ve lost sight of that fact? And quite frankly who (save for a very, very small minority) in the US doesn’t recognize that China poses some real challenges to the United States as well as to other global players?

But a challenge does not necessarily equal a threat, and being a competitor in certain arenas does not mean that you are not a partner in others. Therefore, what is the upshot of fixating on the competition aspect of the US-China relationship?

Americans love a bipolar relationship. Our experiences with the Soviet Union during the Cold War deepened this love. In fact, the Cold War gave us a victim right out of central casting. Officially describing China as a “competitor,” as soft as that term is, will overwhelm all our other efforts with China, and signal “game on” to all who want this to be a bipolar adversarial relationship, in China as well as the US.

Furthermore, China’s current challenges, both domestic and political, can make it very tempting to cast the US as a “foreign devil.” We do not need to encourage that. Much to the contrary, we’re trying to encourage other views. Therefore, breaking out the “competition” label again,

especially at this time, does not seem to be the best way to do this.

We also should not lose sight of the fact that none of our allies and friends wants us to pick a fight, but they all still want us to be in the region. Better to carry the big stick, but speak softly, than the other way round.

We agree with Rep. Forbes on the need to be clear about what the US is doing, especially from a military perspective. Washington isn’t being clear. This is both unfair to the US electorate and diminishes the defense department’s ability to make logical and supportable claims to the nation’s resources. The US should not obfuscate, but should speak frankly about what the strategic concept for the region actually is. If the US cannot clearly articulate its strategic concept, then our policy makers most likely are not thinking about it clearly.

For example, the way we treat Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2AD) and Air Sea Battle (ASB) as mysterious black boxes is most definitely not helping this situation. They are inquiries into the effects of emerging technology on conflict, not strategies. The inquiries are needed. To ignore new technologies is to repeat the mistakes of 1914 Europe, when Europe’s governments and militaries failed to anticipate the deadly effects of mass-produced artillery, machine guns, and poisonous gas, consigning a ghastly percentage of their youth to early graves in WWI. Strategic concept development should be influenced by our findings on technology’s impact.

There is no logical reason that conflict or war with China should occur, but then again there were no logical reasons for war in 1914 either. We are in our strongest position when we support our allies’ interests, and support freedom of access to the global commons, peaceful settlement of disputes in a regionally acceptable manner (read multi-laterally), and so on. We need statecraft, our combat-capable forward-deployed forces, and our allies to do this.

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