

Do U.S. Cuts Threaten its Allies?
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An increasingly cash-strapped America is promising significant cuts to its military. Coupled with a rising China, would the U.S. have to give up on its allies?

In 2010, China supplanted Japan as the world's second-largest economy, a headline-grabbing event that underscored an increasingly apparent reality – the gap in economic power between the United States and China is narrowing rapidly.

When he first took office, President Barack Obama emphasized policies aimed at improving ties with China. But the U.S. announcement in January 2010 that it was providing Taiwan with a massive military aid package prompted an angry response from China. Yet while Washington finds itself increasingly at odds with a rising and more militarily capable China, its deteriorating fiscal situation means Washington has little choice but to reconsider its military posture. The fact is that the United States may have to live with a much narrower military focus than has marked its policies in recent decades.

U.S. defense capabilities are critical to its foreign policy strategy, but they are at the mercy of budgetary realities. With costly domestic programs taking a greater share of the U.S. federal budget as baby boomers retire, the country's budgetary troubles have emerged as a major issue in this year's presidential election.

Responding to charges of profligacy, the White House has tried to craft compromises with Republican lawmakers to reduce the size of the deficit. In last year's Budget Control Act, both parties agreed to tight spending caps that reduce discretionary spending by \$1 trillion over 10 years. More cuts could be coming. Yet even before the latest proposals, the Pentagon was faced with some tough choices. Under then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the U.S. Defense Department in January 2011 announced cuts of \$78 billion to the U.S. military.

One could argue current and proposed U.S. defense cuts have already impacted U.S. defense strategies and posture while reducing necessary emphasis on equipment research, development, and procurement in preparation for long-term threats such as an emerging China and a resurging Russia. According to the Quadrennial Defense Review Report published in February 2010, the United States has taken a number of important decisions, including "ending production of the F-22 fighter, restructuring the procurement of the DDG-1000 destroyer and the Future Combat Systems programs, deferring production of new maritime prepositioning ships, and stretching out procurement of a new class of aircraft carrier."

The problem is that many of the items being hit by budget cuts are indispensable to the large-scale deployment of U.S. military forces, meaning the United States risks a decline in its ability to strategically deploy forces in support of its allies.

And, while the United States is being forced to tighten its purse strings, China is increasing its military spending at a pace that outstrips its impressive economic growth rate. Between 2000 and 2009, China's annual average GDP growth rate was 9.6 percent, while its official defense budget grew 11.8 percent on average, after adjusting for inflation.

This rapid increase in the military budget is underpinned by the powerful political influence wielded by the People's Liberation Army. The role of the PLA was no clearer

than surrounding the test flight of China's new J-20 stealth bomber, which took place during the visit of Gates in January 2011 and, according to many reports, without the prior knowledge of Chinese President Hu Jintao.

But what should be of particular interest for the U.S. and its allies is what isn't known about China's defense budget. The figures announced each year by Beijing are widely believed to significantly underreport spending. Recently, China announced that its military spending was to rise 11.2 percent in 2012 to \$106.4 billion. The U.S. Defense Department, though, has suggested that China's total military spending had actually topped \$150 billion in fiscal 2009.

Such growth is allowing for the rapid strengthening and modernization of China's forces – and is posing an intensifying headache for U.S. military planners. Of particular concern for the United States is the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM), which has a range of 1,500+ kilometers.

The missile – which is relatively inexpensive to produce – is also dubbed the "Carrier Killer" and poses a significant threat to vessels operating in the Western Pacific. The missile is part of what appears to be an anti-access strategy aimed at potentially giving the United States a bloody enough nose to make it think twice about entering conflict areas.

As far back as 2007, the RAND Corporation published a report entitled "Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Anti-Access Strategies and Their Implications for the United States." The document defined anti-access strategy as "any action by an opponent that has the effect of slowing the deployment of friendly forces into a theater, preventing them from operating from certain locations within that theater, or causing them to operate from distances farther from the locus of conflict than they would normally prefer."

The report estimated that China's anti-access measures will massively degrade the ability of U.S. forces to operate from bases near China, while also effectively blocking forward deployment of forces. It also warns China will have an increasing ability to degrade U.S. command, early warning, and supply capabilities for forward deployed troops to the extent that U.S. theater commanders may be forced to withdraw forces to a safer rear position. Crucially, the U.S. fleet might also be prevented from operating in waters near China, including around the Taiwan Strait.

Of course, the United States isn't sitting on its hands, and is crafting a counter anti-access strategy that includes the so-called Air-Sea Battle concept. The "operational concept," which has been developed jointly by the U.S. Navy and Air Force has been crafted to help defeat opposing forces equipped with advanced anti-access and area-denial capabilities. Its purpose is to resolve the problem of how the Navy and the Air Force can integrate their capabilities to address the challenge to the United States' freedom of action in all spheres of operation, including air, sea, ground, space, and cyberspace, and is supposed to help set the direction of future capacity development.

But with numerous competing demands, the Air-Sea Battle concept remains largely that – a concept, and one that is hostage to the political will to properly budget for it.

The Obama administration has famously declared its intention to pivot its focus to the Asia-Pacific region. But in light of the long-term changes to the military power balance between the United States and China, it is looking increasingly difficult for the U.S. military to deter China in the Western Pacific and in its own backyard.

The U.S. is seen as trying to compensate for the increasing constraints placed on it by strengthening ties with regional allies such as Australia and Japan, but it's unclear to what extent America can depend on other nations should conflict break out. Certainly, it seems telling that China's military officials apparently regard Japan as vulnerable to Chinese political and diplomatic intimidation. Such a belief suggests that China, and perhaps the United States, see a constitutionally constrained Japan as unlikely to step up should China and the U.S. clash, and there are certainly questions over what constraints Japan might be forced to try to place on U.S. forces operating from its territory due to domestic political considerations.

Importantly, the RAND report notes that among the United States' forward operating naval and air bases, those in the Western Pacific will be vital. But this suggests that U.S. military bases in Japan are potential targets for China in the event of a conflict. This fact won't have gone unnoticed among Chinese officials, and it raises the question of whether the U.S. might be forced in the event of conflict to at least temporarily withdraw some of its forces from Japan.

Such doubts may be unfounded, but with China's growing anti-access capabilities they can hardly be ignored. It's a danger that is taken seriously among Japanese planners as it's a development that could rock the foundations of Tokyo's security policy.

The U.S. may have the best of intentions with its pivot to the Pacific. But budget realities and a rising China may mean that the United States and its allies should also be prepared for the worst.

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