

Review – Confronting China

Written by Timothy R. Heath

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TIMOTHY R. HEATH, MAR 1 2025

Confronting China

By James H. Anderson and Daniel R. Green

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024

Billed as a guide for practitioners, the pragmatic focus of *Confronting China*, a volume edited by James H. Anderson and Daniel R. Green (Praeger, 2024), proves both a strength and a weakness. The chapters, authored by knowledgeable and well-credentialed experts, concisely summarize the key policy disputes and challenges related to China in a broad array of topics, ranging from alliance management to cyberspace. However, the book's focus on the military dimension of the competition proves a weakness. Lacking a clear and compelling explanation of the threat posed by China's military, recommendations for a massive U.S. military buildup appear unpersuasive and impractical.

The book begins with the fairly uncontroversial observation that "China's rise as a peer competitor has created an unprecedented threat to the post Second World War international order" (p.1). It cannot be denied that China has become a near-peer, with the second largest economy in the world and diplomatic influence that extends around the world. China's dissatisfaction with major elements of the U.S.-led international order is also well known. As but one example, in 2016, senior diplomat Fu Ying compared the existing U.S.-led international order and its compatibility with China to an "old suit that no longer fits."

Yet characterizing China in these terms suggests that the contest will mainly play out in the diplomatic, political, and economic domains. Some of the chapters do recognize the importance of these non-military domains, especially in the sections that review Beijing's efforts to undermine U.S. alliances and spread Chinese influence in Africa, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific.

But reflecting a theme of "security," the book focuses principally on the military dimension of the competition. As the authors point out, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has undergone a massive and unsettling buildup over the past few decades. From 2000 to 2016, China's military budget increased annually by about 10 percent, although this growth subsequently slowed to about 5–7 percent per year. China's military, as the annual DOD report on Chinese military power has noted, now fields advanced aircraft, missiles, warships, and tanks in numbers that exceed or only slightly lag behind that of the United States.

To what end is China modernizing its forces? Although the book's authors, following conventional wisdom, assume Beijing's motivations are aggressive, they overlook other potential economic and political reasons. Chinese leaders generously fund the military in part to cultivate its support, provide patronage, bolster patriotic support, and encourage military contributions to economic development. These economic and political factors explain, in part, the persistent problems of corruption and poor combat readiness that plague the PLA.

Even if we assume that the buildup is driven purely by aggressive impulses, and even if we assume that the buildup eventually results in highly competent, lethal military, it's not clear how a powerful PLA could help Beijing achieve its goals. The authors repeatedly assert that China's military buildup is somehow tied to its presumed goal of "global dominance" (p. 103). Yet China's military is widely regarded as a regional military at best with a limited ability to

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project power abroad. China has no military allies except maybe North Korea and only one overseas military base (in Djibouti), while the United States has dozens of allies and as many as 750 military bases in 80 countries.

Despite the disparity in global military presence, perhaps China could use its military to challenge America's primacy in a war of power transition. Andersen's introductory chapter hints at this possibility, stating that "most great power rivalries ultimately end in bloodshed." Similarly, Green's chapter cites books with titles such as *The Coming Conflict with China* to suggest such a war may loom ahead (p. 25). However, power transition war tends to occur when a rising power threatens to surpass a status quo power. China's downward trajectory and continued U.S. economic success has made such a transition increasingly unlikely. In 2021, China's economy reached 76% of the size of the U.S. economy, but three years later, stagnation left China's economy at 2/3 the size of a thriving U.S. economy.

As prospects for power transition war have receded, some have instead proposed a war motivated by a declining China's fears about the future. But these predictions have not borne out, as Chinese leaders have shown little interest in belligerence amid a consuming focus on domestic woes. The most popular argument is that China might start a war with Taiwan that escalates into a broader war with the United States, a view advanced by several authors in the book. However, this does not solve the problem of how a powerful PLA helps China achieve its goal of international primacy. A Chinese victory over Taiwan does not guarantee U.S. capitulation any more than Japan's victory over the United States at Pearl Harbor did. Moreover, war between China and the United States, regardless of how or where it began, carries an enormous risk of escalation to nuclear annihilation, which would render questions of "international primacy" meaningless. Even if the United States decided not to directly intervene in a China-Taiwan war, it is unclear if this would truly end U.S. international leadership. After all, America's refusal to involve itself directly in combat operations when Russia invaded Ukraine did not fatally undermine U.S. international leadership.

Perhaps, despite these objections, the scale and breadth of the PLA's modernization demands a U.S. response. If so, what? Here arises a second problem with the book—the impracticality of a proposed massive U.S. military buildup. On page 304, an author calls for floating "\$300 billion a year" in bonds to pay for expanded defense production to "dissuade China from breaking the peace." Similarly, one author proposes a return to a "two war" force planning construct, which, the author acknowledged, could entail "quantitative and qualitative improvements to U.S. conventional forces," "more robust force deployments," and a "greater ability to 'swing' forces from one theater of operations to another before and during a conflict" (p. 180). The resource implications of funding such a large military are staggering and raise questions about whether this really is the only or best response.

After all, such a breathtaking ambition faces serious economic and political hurdles. Anxiety about the country's colossal debt burden has left the American public and Congress skeptical even about current levels of military spending. Severe and intractable problems of political polarization and perpetually low public support for the government have dissuaded U.S. administrations from directly involving American troops in warzones in Europe and the Middle East. Even indirect assistance, through military aid, has proven contentious and difficult to sustain.

China's challenge to U.S. leadership remains real and imposing, but the military competition does not appear to be the most urgent domain. Future research could perhaps guide policy makers in how to conduct a complex, multi-domain rivalry with China in a manner that accords with the country's increasingly severe economic constraints and fragile politics. However, that book awaits to be written another day.

About the author:

Timothy R. Heath is a senior international defense researcher at RAND. Prior to joining RAND, Heath had over fifteen years of experience in the U.S. government researching and analyzing military and political topics related to China. In addition to his publications with RAND, Heath has published numerous articles and two books. Fluent in Mandarin Chinese, he has extensive experience analyzing China's national strategy, politics, ideology, and military, as well as Asian regional security developments.

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