



**China. There, I Said It** by J. Randy Forbes

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Despite the trend lines over the last decade, there is a frightening reluctance on the part of government officials to speak openly about the challenges we face from the People's Republic of China. This needs to end. US officials must come to accept that while there are plenty of opportunities for cooperation with the PRC, there are also elements of our relationship that are and will remain competitive. Indeed, we are engaged in an extended peacetime competition with the PRC that at its heart is a clash of visions for the international system. This is not to say that conflict between our countries is inevitable. But if US leaders are expected to marshal the diplomatic and military resources necessary to engage in this long-term competition, they must first be willing to speak more candidly about Beijing's growing capabilities and strategic intentions.

The reluctance of US officials to discuss the ongoing strategic competition with the PRC is hardly a new trend. During the 1990s, thoughtful observers at the Pentagon believed that if we treated China like an "enemy" we would only ensure it became one. Since that time, efforts to avoid mentioning China or its People's Liberation Army (PLA) in military documents or adopt carefully crafted diplomatic language have ensued.

For example, the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review has frequently avoided discussing China's military modernization or the specific capabilities required to address it. In 2007, the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard released a maritime strategy that failed to even mention China. Over the last dozen years the Congressionally mandated China's Military Power Report has been slowly watered-down, including a change of the title to try and ease Beijing's protests of the report. Even when it comes to the new air-sea battle concept, designed to help combatant commanders defeat anti-access/area-denial capabilities, like the PRC is developing, Pentagon officials have gone to great lengths to insist its development is not about China. In sum, while we have continued to avoid or dilute the increasingly obvious evidence of an extended peacetime competition in the hope that China's protests will subside, unless we repeat what Beijing wants or decide to say nothing at all, our actions will never be deemed acceptable in Beijing.

The desire to avoid a public discussion of the strategic competition also exists in private. Beyond specific weapons programs and capabilities, defense officials are extremely reluctant to discuss the ways China is challenging our strategic interests or to discuss innovative ways to counter their

advances. Two professors at the US Naval War College, who are among some of the nation's best researchers on PRC military power, recently remarked that "China is the Voldemort of U.S. military planning. For, just as the appellation of Harry Potter's dreaded nemesis may not be uttered aloud, American strategists dare not speak China's name lest terrifying consequences follow." I have been in closed meetings with senior defense officials who became visibly uncomfortable with answering generic questions about PRC military developments. While the Chinese discuss competition with the US openly, we remain disengaged from a discourse that could be critical to avoiding a future conflict.

Writing about the need to speak more frankly about the nature of the competition will be deemed by some as unnecessarily provocative. First, critics will contend that, like during the 1990s, if we use terminology to describe China as a competitor, this could lead to further competition and the potential for arms racing and conflict. But China is *already* competing with us. Their military modernization effort of the last 15 years, combined with open-source doctrine and strategic publications, reflects a clear intention to focus on undermining traditional US military advantages. Indeed, Rear Adm. Yang Yi, former director of the PLA National Defense University's Institute for Strategic Studies, has gone so far as to remark that "We hope the competition will be healthy competition." More importantly, we must recognize that the best way to avoid great-power conflict is to remain vigilantly prepared. This means being less reluctant to discuss the actions China is taking that leave us concerned: most notably their rapid military modernization, more assertive diplomatic posture (especially when it concerns freedom of navigation), cyber activities, aggressive espionage, and support for regimes like North Korea, Sudan, Iran, and Syria.

Critics are also likely to complain that discussing China in these terms will be a return to a "Cold War mentality." Far from it. The US and China are not in an ideological competition on the scale of the Cold War and they share one of the largest trade relationships in the world. In fact, the United States has actively worked to enable China's success over the last three decades. However, contrary to the belief that the end of the Cold War was also the end of great-power competition, today the US and China do find themselves in competition in specific geographic, economic, and strategic areas. This does not mean it will lead to conflict. Nor should it necessitate an overreaction. But because these areas of competition are not likely to subside, we must think carefully about how the United States can position itself for success.

One of the greatest challenges we face in attempting to prepare for an extended peacetime competition with the PRC rests with securing and sustaining the necessary resources. If the Navy wants to build a larger attack submarine fleet or the Air Force hopes to develop and field a new long-range bomber

in the decade ahead, for instance, civilian and military leaders will have to clearly articulate the role these platforms play in our national security policy to the Congress and US public. Ultimately, we will not succeed if we remain averse to discussing the strategic competition where we find ourselves or talking openly about PLA military modernization and how it affects our goals and objectives.

China is a competitor. There, I said it.

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