

Chinese belligerence must not be accepted

Written by John Bolton

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For years, foreign policy optimists have predicted that China's rise to superpower status would be peaceful and responsible, but recent Chinese actions make this vision look increasingly naive. The administration of US President Barack Obama must decide whether to respond to Beijing's hostility or allow its aggressiveness to go unchecked.

China continues to modernize and expand its nuclear-capable delivery systems, even as Obama urges Senate ratification of a treaty with Russia that would further reduce US nuclear weapons and long-range conventional delivery systems. Beijing operates under no restraints whatsoever in enhancing its nuclear and ballistic missile options, while also developing new "carrier killer" cruise missiles.

On nuclear non-proliferation, China is even more uncooperative. As Washington pushes for further economic sanctions against Iran, Beijing is distancing itself from the effort and was never really serious about tough sanctions. If anything, it is now likely to double down on its relationship with Iran, particularly with regard to oil and natural gas, to help Tehran meet its domestic need for refined petroleum products.

Updated US sanctions against North Korea also are not sitting well with the Chinese. In many respects, the Obama administration has taken a tougher line against Pyongyang than former US president George W. Bush's administration did. On the other hand, Obama has not made it clear that the only stable long-term solution to the problem of the North's nuclear program is the reunification of the peninsula under a democratic government. This should be an urgent priority, since North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's poor health brings that day of reckoning ever nearer.

Nor has the president responded strongly enough to Chinese efforts to keep US warships from transiting and exercising in the Yellow Sea. North Korea's unresolved maritime border with South Korea there is a continuing source of tension and Pyongyang has, with tacit Chinese support, repeatedly made threats against US-South Korean naval exercises.

Washington must be clear in word and deed that we will sail in international waters when and where we deem it advisable. US weakness on freedom of the seas is particularly dangerous given Chinese naval behavior in the South China Sea, buttressing Beijing's territorial claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands. US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton rightly took a more confrontational stance on this issue last month when she rejected China's position.

Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪) called her remarks an "attack" and said US involvement would "only make matters worse and the resolution more difficult."

Domestically, Beijing is also on the offensive, prompting even previously submissive foreign investors to fight back. Google's refusal to capitulate to Chinese interference continues, while both European and US business interests have complained about increased discrimination

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against foreigners in China's domestic markets. General Electric chief executive Jeffrey Immelt accused Beijing of "hostility" to foreign corporations and there appear to be increasing obstacles for lenders to recover on defaulted debts from Chinese firms.

China's long-awaited transition to a more democratic government isn't going anywhere. Beijing's repression of religious freedom continues and the government is still flooding Tibet and Xinjiang with ethnic Han Chinese to overwhelm the "splittist" tendencies in those regions.

China's leaders cannot expect the US and other governments to remain passive for long. "Softly, softly" is hardly the right reaction to Beijing's new belligerence, unless Obama is prepared to see it continue.

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