

Contrary to China's recent behavior, Washington is still stronger than Beijing

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What happened to China's much vaunted "soft power" and "good neighborly" diplomacy about which we have heard so much in recent years? China's supposed "soft power," always overstated, has passed from the scene in short order.

Over the past few months, the Chinese have not-so-softly declined to invite Secretary of Defense Gates to visit Beijing; called the South China Sea a "core interest" (akin to claiming that the sea is China's territorial water); threatened to retaliate if the United States proceeds with the sale of additional F-16s to Taiwan; and refused to so much as condemn the North Koreans for killing 46 South Koreans sailors in cold blood.

Why are the Chinese coming out swinging now? Two reasons. One is the smell of American weakness, which Obama appears to be correcting. The second is that all is not well within China.

On reason one: As master practitioners of it, the Chinese Communist Party understands and respects power. It was no accident that Sino-American relations were stable, and at times even constructive, while President Bush was balancing China's power by upgrading relations with Japan, selling arms to Taiwan, and developing a strategic partnership with India.

President Obama approached China differently, eschewing balance of power politics and going out of his way to avoid ruffling Beijing's feathers. For example, the U.S. relationship with India was not considered an important part of Asia's balance of power, China's human rights abuses were ignored, and the administration put off selling needed arms to Taiwan or meeting with the Dalai Lama for as long as it could. While Obama saw these moves as strengthening a partnership with Beijing, China jumped at the chance to end what it views as America's irritating practice of meeting with the Tibetan spiritual leader and helping Taiwan defend itself.

On top of these misguided policies, Japan was going through its own political turmoil and, through no fault of President Obama's, thus unavailable to help maintain the balance of power.

Predictably, Beijing saw a U.S. government it could push around and wanted more. Now it is going for the jugular, demanding an end to arms sales to Taiwan and declaring the South China Sea a Chinese lake.

China's manifold domestic problems are another cause of China's belligerence. With an upcoming political succession in 2012, featuring party cadres without any ties to the communist revolution vying for leadership roles, the politburo has every reason to worry. Popular unrest is also becoming more political, sophisticated, and organized, as many migrant workers have worked in different places, and seen inequalities and injustices all over the country (see Minxin Pei's recent article in *The Diplomat*).

It is likely that the People's Liberation Army and China's anti-American nationalists see a ripe time to put pressure on the political system and to "get tough." What one hears from the Chinese is, "we are strong and not going to take it in anymore." The "it" includes arms sales to Taiwan and U.S. military activity in China's periphery.

The Obama administration appears to have gotten the message. They did sell a much needed package of arms to Taiwan. Secretary Gates did not mince words in talking about U.S. and allied interests in the South China Sea and the administration appears to be going forward with joint anti-submarine warfare exercises with the South Koreans despite howls of protests from China.

Washington still has a strong hand to play. China is growing stronger, but, for all of its chest thumping, it pales in strength compared with the United States and its allies in Asia. And none of our Asian allies want a dominant China.

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Indeed, one of the untold stories in Asia is the region's military modernization. Almost all of our allies are buying advanced tactical aircraft (mostly the F-35), maritime surveillance capabilities, and diesel submarines -- to deal with a rising China. The atmosphere is ripe for us to begin creating an informal network of alliances operating more closely together, particularly since much of what our allies are buying is American equipment. Washington should start to build the institutions today that will allow the allies to train together on their fifth-generation aircraft, patrol the South China Seas, and hunt for submarines. How about announcing the creation of a fifth generation aircraft "center for excellence" in Singapore, where all allies can train?

The point is that there is still a chance to present China with a choice: act like a responsible power or face a great wall of resistance. The good news is that there are many Chinese who want the former.