

Running Out the Clock on China

By Caitlyn Bess

Caitlyn Bess is a Masters of International Affairs candidate at the Bush School of Government and Public Service concentrating in diplomacy, grand strategy, and women and security.

People are pretty worried about China, and with good reason. The CCP's foreign policy has become a lot more aggressive under Xi Jinping, who has built up China's military, asserted territorial claims, pushed predatory foreign aid, and peddled China's ideology worldwide. And since Xi did away with term limits, we can reasonably expect the 67-year-old to lead the country of 1.4 billion people for the next couple of decades until he dies. "The Chinese Communist Party is a Marxist-Leninist Party focused on struggle and international domination," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo proclaimed in October 2019, and "President Trump has made clear this is a central relationship for the United States for the next 50 or 100 years."¹ One way Trump has made this clear is by pumping more and more money into the Department of Defense, which is back to preparing for great power war after nearly two decades of focusing on counterterrorism and COIN.

Would China actually be able to take over the world though, as Trump officials and defense planners seem to fret it will? Will U.S. foreign policy revolve around a "new Cold War" with China 50-100 years from now? I predict no. Even a cursory glance at China's demographic trendline indicates the United States just needs to run out the clock on China. It will get less threatening, not more, with time.

China has sown the seeds of its own demographic destruction. The country is facing two big reproductive problems: its sex ratio and its birthrate. Currently, China's sex ratio for people age 15-44 (a woman's child-bearing years) is 109.3 men for every 100 women.² In raw numbers, that means there are about 41,280,794 more marriage age men (20-49) than marriage age women (15-44).³ There simply are not enough women to go around, which is a direct effect of the country's One Child Policy from 1980-2015 and a strong cultural preference for sons. For those women who do exist, they are not having many babies. The CCP replaced the One Child Policy with a Two Child Policy in 2015, but the birth rate is still only 1.6 births per woman, which is below the population replacement rate of 2.1. Due to a myriad of social reasons, this birth rate does not appear likely to rise any time soon absent some draconian new birth quota law.⁴ As a result, Chinese society is getting older, and this trend will only accelerate in the coming decades.

But let us zoom in on just one population subset: fighting age males (age 15-49). People who worry China may start taking over nearby countries and eventually the world should care

¹ Pompeo, Mike. The China Challenge. (30 Oct 2019). The Hudson Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/the-china-challenge/>

² All numbers are from U.S. Census Bureau

³ Cutting off "marriage age men" at 49 reflects a conservative estimate, since it is an unfortunate fact of human nature that men over age 49 are interested in women much younger than they. Factoring in these men would make the Chinese marriage market look even more competitive.

⁴ Wee, Sui-Lee and Steven Lee Myers. (16 Jan 2020). "China's Birthrate Hits Historic Low, in Looming Crisis for Beijing." *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/16/business/china-birth-rate-2019.html>

about how many fighting age males it has, as world domination would require quite a few of them.⁵ Currently, China has more fighting age males than the U.S. has total population. This alone might make defense planners balk and squawk for more money, but cooler heads should stop and think. The United States is not the only country in the world with an interest in keeping China from taking over Asian countries. Those Asian countries themselves have an existential (and therefore stronger) interest in making sure that doesn't happen. So what does the situation look like if you just factor in nuclear-armed India, the second (soon to be first) most populous country in the world? According to estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau, China already has fewer fighting age males than India by itself, and this difference is only projected to grow. When other surrounding countries like Indonesia and the Philippines are factored in, China's fighting age males are even more vastly outnumbered.

A Closer Look

Fighting age males = 15-49	2020	2030	2040
India's fighting age males	372,792,056	401,386,641	415,885,888
China's fighting age males	359,600,063	333,029,026	296,967,408
Difference	13,191,993	68,357,615	118,918,480

*all numbers from the International Data Base from the U.S. Census Bureau

It certainly would be difficult for China to take and hold territory from such populous neighbors, especially since the United States' recent adventures in COIN have shown the whole world how hard that is to do, even with a technologically superior force. So if you believe, as John Mearsheimer writes, that "even in a nuclear world, armies are the core ingredient of military power," and "great-power wars are won mainly on the ground," the above numbers should come as a relief.⁶ China does not have the numbers advantage that many think it does, and other Asian nations can and will balance against China, because it is in their direct interest to do so. Adding the United States to the mix further strengthens this coalition to counter China.

There are two situations that could make China a problem in the long-term, but both of them come with mitigating factors. The first is if there is a revolution in military affairs in the next few decades which alleviates the need for ground troops for taking and controlling territory. Perhaps China could do this relying on air power à la the First Gulf War to take territory, then hold it by installing its well-known surveillance capabilities to control the local population. However, this would still be immensely expensive, and remember that China is rapidly aging. According to recent research by Brooks et al, an older population hampers its state's ability to wage war because so many of the nation's resources must be used on social goods like healthcare and pensions.⁷ World domination will be a tough sell to China's public when a

⁵ I only count males since the societies in question have negligible percentages of females in the military, and in India they don't even serve in combat roles. See "Women in the army: female fighters in the world's seven biggest armies." (30 Nov 2018) Retrieved at <https://www.army-technology.com/uncategorised/women-in-the-army/>

⁶ Mearsheimer, John. (2014). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York. p. 56

⁷ Deborah Jordan Brooks, Stephen G. Brooks, Brian D. Greenhill, and Mark L. Haas, "The Demographic Transition Theory of War: Why Young Societies Are Conflict Prone and Old Societies Are

generation of “Only Children” start demanding more help from the state to care for all of their parents and grandparents.

The second situation in which China could be a long-term threat is if the CCP implemented some sort of birth quota on Chinese women. This is the only real option the CCP has to increase China’s population since the homogenous country is so averse to immigration. A birth quota may seem far-fetched, but the CCP has shown through the One-Child and Two-Child Policies that it is willing and able to regulate its people’s fertility as a state resource. However, like the One Child policy before it, a birth quota policy would probably come with a host of unforeseen social problems that could negate the benefits of a larger future fighting force. Furthermore, the PLA would not benefit from such a policy until 18 years after whenever it was implemented, so the rest of the world would have that much time to prepare for the increase. Meanwhile, Xi Jinping might die before this hypothetical crop of babies reached fighting age, and his successor may be less aggressive.

So, China may not pose as much of a military threat in the long-term, but what about the short term? It is true that if Xi Jinping were to invade one of China’s neighbors, he would need to make his move sooner rather than later. However, no one seems to believe such an invasion will actually happen in the next decade or two. A report issued by the Department of Defense itself says, “However, China’s leaders employ tactics short of armed conflict to pursue China’s strategic objectives through activities calculated to fall below the threshold of provoking armed conflict with the United States, its allies and partners, or others in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁸

So if China is not a long-term military threat, and armed conflict is unlikely in the short-term as well, what are Trump officials and defense planners actually afraid of? The confrontation with China is serious, but it will play out in the economic, cyber, ideological, and diplomatic realms, and U.S. resources should be allocated accordingly. This probably means less money for the Department of Defense and more money for the State Department and foreign aid agencies, as they are the “boots on the ground” of U.S. economic, ideological, and diplomatic policies (DoD should continue as the standard-bearer for U.S. cyber defense). Defense planners will once again balk at such a suggestion, but in light of the preceding argument, it is difficult to see such protests as anything more than threat inflation. China is a challenge, no doubt, but it has shot itself in the foot demographically. The U.S. should be patient, get its own house in order, and wait for China to reap what it has sown.

the Most Peaceful,” *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Winter 2018/19, pp. 53-95.

⁸ 2019 China Military Power Report. Department of Defense, p. ii.