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Is the Expansion of Chinese Military Capability a Threat to the Stability of the Western Pacific?

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Abstract

This paper assesses China's military expansion for the western Pacific region. It finds that China's growing military power is not a cause for concern for a number of reasons. On balance, the conclusions it draws are that China is modernising its armed forces, developing peacefully, and behaving in the manner of a responsible global citizen. Further, it finds that China's immediate neighbours in this region, with the exception of Taiwan, do not regard China as a military threat. They have not, for example, undertaken balancing or containment activities, or significantly increased their own military spending.

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Introduction

One of the most important questions preoccupying policy makers, military planners and analysts across the Asia-Pacific is whether the rise of China, with its associated increases in military capability, will destabilise the region. This paper will argue that despite the uncertainty surrounding Chinese intentions, a major increase in Chinese military capabilities will not necessarily be destabilising for the western Pacific. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that China is not seeking to develop military power to coerce its neighbours – with the potential exception of Taiwan. Moreover, its neighbours generally appear to accept that this is the case. However, there is always the possibility of developments, which, in conjunction with increased Chinese military power, could present destabilising 'strategic shocks'. An example of this would be a withdrawal of United States military forces from the western Pacific.

It is first necessary to limit the scope of this paper. First, it is not arguing that the rise of China will not cause instability. There is a range of potentially destabilising factors that are not military in nature, but could still cause crises. Increased Chinese demand for oil could raise prices to the point that economic growth and standards of living drop markedly in regional countries. Such phenomena are outside the scope of this paper. Second, China shares land borders with fourteen countries. However, since recent increases in Chinese military power have focused largely on naval, air and missile forces, this paper will focus mainly on the impact on China's maritime neighbours such as Japan, South Korea, the ASEAN nations as well as on the United States (US). Finally, since China's policy towards Taiwan is essentially unique and does not characterise its policy towards its other neighbours, this essay does not directly address implications for Taiwan.¹

The idea that a state's military modernisation can be destabilising rests upon a number of assumptions. The first is that the state is willing to use its increased military capability to achieve its goals through force. The second assumption is that neighbouring states regard the increased military capability as a threat and are willing to react to it in ways that could in turn threaten the first state, by, for example, increasing their own military expenditure. These states could also act cooperatively to deter the threat, for example by forming alliances to balance or contain the perceived threat. Moreover, threat can be seen as a combination of capability and intention. Therefore the fundamental questions are: do neighbouring states perceive China as having the military capability to achieve its goal by force; do they think China is willing

¹ As this essay will argue, Chinese military modernisation is focused predominantly on Taiwan. Whether this is merely to deter Taiwan from formally declaring independence or is aimed at coercing Taiwan into acceding to reunification is the subject of considerable debate. If it is the latter, then there is the further question of whether this coercion could occur in the face of US intervention. There is the additional question of how war with Taiwan and the US – which could be conducted in a range of ways with a range of outcomes – would destabilise the broader region. In short, the issue of war over Taiwan exceeds the space available for this essay.

to use that capability; and are they reacting to that threat in ways that could threaten or provoke China? This is a complex set of questions as it involves subjective perceptions of threat just as much as it does objective assessments of capability.

China's Military Modernisation

China's military expenditure keeps increasing dramatically, often at a rate even greater than its spectacular economic growth.² This increase is being used to modernise the PLA, rather than expand it. Numerically the PLA has actually declined in size. A key element of this modernisation is what the PLA terms 'informatisation'.³ This is essentially the Chinese equivalent of the Revolution in Military Affairs or what the US has termed 'transformation'. A key driver in this process is the Chinese realisation, after recent conflicts such as the First and Second Gulf Wars, that it lags significantly behind the US in networked operations.

China is also improving weapons and platforms. These include acquisitions across the spectrum of capabilities. However, China is focused predominantly on capabilities that would allow it to coerce Taiwan or to deter or defeat US intervention in a cross-straits conflict by employing an anti-access strategy.⁴ These capabilities include short-range ballistic missiles and long-range air-to-surface missiles based opposite Taiwan. China is also developing anti-ship ballistic missiles that in conjunction with over-the-horizon radars seek to target US carrier task forces 1,500 km away. Even the more conventional new capabilities such as fourth generation fighter aircraft are being based opposite Taiwan. China has indigenously developed new surface vessels and submarines, and has acquired them from Russia.⁵

Yet a number of caveats are necessary when assessing China's ability to use force against its maritime neighbours. Its high-end, modern platforms such as air warfare ships and fourth generation fighters are still limited in number.⁶ Moreover J. Marshall

² The growth of the Chinese defence budget is provided in Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress. Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2009* (hereafter *Military Power of PRC*). The report states that in March 2008 China 'announced a 17.6% increase in its military budget to approximately \$60 billion.' This continues a 'two-decade trend of double-digit percentage annual increases.' Moreover, since China's published military budgets do not include all expenditure, the total military budget could be over twice as much as the declared figure (pp. 31-33). Chinese official figures are provided in the most recent Chinese defence White Paper and emphasise the low base that defence expenditures started from (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defence in 2008*, People's Republic of China, 20 January 2009, Chapter XII).

³ A definition of informatisation is provided in *Military Power of the PRC*, p. 11, and in *China's National Defence in 2008*, Chapter III.

⁴ This is the position of many observers, for example Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 'Understanding China's Military Strategy,' *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 6, 2008, pp. 1013-1046.

⁵ *Military Power of the PRC* provides an overview of these capabilities, in particular pp. 47-50. For a detailed account of China's anti-access capabilities see also Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and their Implications for the United States*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2007.

⁶ The vast bulk of China's air combat fleet, for example, consists of much older types, and while much has been made of China's acquisition of Russian destroyers with an area air-defence capability, they are still significantly

Beier has warned against making the same mistake with China that was made with the Soviet Union – platforms do not necessarily equal power. Chinese systems suffer from reliability issues, and PLA personnel lack operational experience and even training hours. And even its most modern platforms are not technologically the equal of Western or Japanese systems.⁷ Some observers assess that China faces considerable structural obstacles in catching up to the US in networked capabilities.⁸ The US's own capabilities are likely to be getting even further ahead due to their testing and improvement in the crucible of conflict. Finally, most observers assess that China still has very limited power projection capabilities to conduct operations beyond Taiwan. Most notably, despite a lengthy debate, China has not yet started construction of aircraft carriers.⁹

China's Intentions

China under the Communist Party has not been a pacifist power and has been willing to use force even beyond its borders.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is little evidence to suggest that China is developing its military power in order to use it against its neighbours - with the potential exception of Taiwan noted earlier.

China has been very active in presenting a peaceful image of itself to the world. President Hu Jintao has used the term 'harmonious world' to describe China's model of international relations and Zheng Bijian developed the term 'peaceful rise' to describe China's development.¹¹ The latest Chinese defence White Paper adopts this terminology stating that 'China is unswervingly taking the road of peaceful development...endeavouring to build, together with other countries, a harmonious world of enduring peace and common prosperity.'¹² While Chinese statements should not be taken at face value, they should not be dismissed as mere rhetoric. There is considerable incentive for China to avoid conflict that would interfere with its continued economic growth. The need to maintain the international conditions necessary for economic growth has become a central goal of Chinese foreign policy.¹³

outnumbered by the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force's Aegis-equipped vessels. See *Military Power of the PRC*, pp. 47-50 for developments in conventional PLA capabilities.

⁷ J. Marshall Beier, 'Bear Facts and Dragon Boats: Rethinking the Modernization of Chinese Naval Power', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2005, pp. 287-316.

⁸ Arthur S. Ding, 'China's Revolution in Military Affairs: An Uphill Endeavour', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2008, pp. 81-99.

⁹ On China's long-standing but unfulfilled desire for aircraft carriers, see Ian Storey and You Ji, 'China's Aircraft Carrier Ambitions: Seeking Truth from Rumours', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2004, pp. 7-93; Andrew S. Erickson and Andrew R. Wilson, 'China's Aircraft Carrier Dilemma', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2006, pp. 13-45.

¹⁰ Gerald Segal, *Defending China*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985.

¹¹ Zheng Bijian, 'China's "Peaceful Rise" to Great-Power Status', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 5, 2005, pp. 18-24.

¹² *China's National Defence in 2008*, Preface.

¹³ Bijian, 'China's "Peaceful Rise."'

China has shown itself quite willing to peacefully resolve – or at least manage – disputes with its maritime neighbours. Indeed, its focus on avoiding conflict to permit development predates Hu Jintao and motivated its moderate behaviour over the South China Seas territorial disputes with ASEAN members in the 1990s. China acceded to the ASEAN code of conduct for the South China Sea and has embarked on joint resource development projects there with ASEAN members.¹⁴ Similarly, while China's territorial disputes with Japan in the East China Sea have not been fully resolved, the two countries have declared East China Sea a sea of 'peace, stability and cooperation' and reached agreement on the joint development of gas fields.¹⁵

China has taken considerable efforts to demonstrate that it is a good international citizen, for example in approving and participating in United Nations peacekeeping missions. Increasingly, China has come to realise that it needs to contribute to the maintenance of the peace and stability that serves China's interests so well.¹⁶

Responses to China's Military Modernisation

In discussions about threat, perception of intentions is just as significant as actual intentions. There is a huge range of views on China's intentions. This paper cannot assess all of them and their empirical and theoretical underpinnings. At one end of the spectrum are hawkish portrayals of a realist China aiming at redrawing the regional system by force; at the other, constructivist views that China's desire to preserve the conditions for continued economic development make conflict highly unlikely, or indeed impossible, in an era of global economic interdependence.¹⁷

Certainly, one can point to examples of belligerent Chinese language or aggressive behaviour in the region.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the actions of China's neighbours overall suggest they are willing to cooperate with China. 'Realist' conflicts over territory or resources are not inevitable. The agreements with ASEAN and Japan mentioned above

¹⁴ Li Mingjiang, 'Security in the South China Sea: China's Balancing Act and New Regional Dynamics,' S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, No. 149, 11 February 2008. The presence of US military power should also be seen as a factor that encouraged all participants to cooperate.

¹⁵ Zhang Tuosheng, 'China-Japan Relations at a New Juncture', in Ron Huisken (ed.), *Rising China: Power and Reassurance*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2009, p. 40.

¹⁶ Stefan Stähle, 'China's Shifting Attitude towards United Nations Peacekeeping Operations', *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 195, September 2008, pp. 607-630. This is not to overlook episodes of questionable Chinese behaviour, such as supplying arms to and signing energy deals with repressive regimes, or providing 'no strings attached' aid that undermines governance in developing countries.

¹⁷ An overview of the range of assessments is provided in Daniel Lynch, 'Chinese Thinking on the Future of International Relations: Realism as the *Ti*, Rationalism as the *Yong*?' *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 197, 2009, pp. 87-107. There are also those (including the author of this paper) who do not find the terminology of western International Relations theory to be particularly useful; see David Kang, 'Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks', *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2003, pp. 57-85.

¹⁸ For example, PLAN harassment of the US survey ship USNS Impeccable in the South China Sea outside of China's territorial waters in March 2009.

illustrate this. Also, China and its neighbours are able to recognise when good relations are failing and take remedial action. For example, China and Japan entered a period of bitter tension from the mid-1990s. This intensified from around 2004 with large-scale anti-Japanese riots in Chinese cities and the interruption of high-level exchanges at the end of 2005. However, both sides were able to recognise the risks associated with such behaviour and took action to restore good relations on a range of levels, beginning with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to China in October 2006.¹⁹

Moreover, there is little evidence of a regional arms race between China and its neighbours.²⁰ The US has been refining its force disposition, principally by relocating forces from Okinawa to Guam, but it has not been increasing its forces in the western Pacific. Japanese defence expenditure has stayed stable or even declined in real terms in recent years.²¹ South Korean force structure has essentially remained focused on deterring North Korean aggression. Other neighbours such as ASEAN states have only limited resources to acquire new capabilities even if they did see China as a threat.²²

In addition, there has been little evidence of other forms of behaviour that could in turn antagonise China and be destabilising. There have been no explicit forms of balancing; ASEAN for example has not portrayed itself as a counter-balance to China. The US has moved away from the terminology of containment of China towards engagement with China.²³ Containment had never really been adopted by India, Australia, or Japan – states that could have participated in an overt containment strategy. India resolutely pursues its own foreign policy and does not want to be seen as part of a US containment strategy.²⁴

¹⁹ Zhang Tuosheng, 'China-Japan relations at a New Juncture', in Ron Huisken (ed.), *Rising China: Power and Reassurance*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2009.

²⁰ Notwithstanding some misinterpreted remarks by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

²¹ 'Sentinel Security Assessment – China and Northeast Asia', *Jane's Sentinel*, 5 November 2008, available at: <<http://www.janes.com/articles/Janes-Sentinel-Security-Assessment-China-And-Northeast-Asia/Defence-budget-Japan.html>>, accessed 1 May 2009.

²² Richard Bitzinger writes that while South East Asian nations are concerned about a rising China, 'of all the avenues...the military response is probably given the least emphasis in Southeast Asia's dealings with the PRC', Richard A. Bitzinger, 'The China Syndrome: Chinese Military Modernization of the Rearming of Southeast Asia', S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, No. 126, 2 May 2007, p. 31.

²³ This was made clear in US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's initial visit to north Asia in 2009.

²⁴ Lisa Curtis, 'The Triangular Dynamic in Asia: The U.S., India and China', *Heritage Lectures*, No. 1017, 26 April 2007; James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, 'China and the United States in the Indian Ocean: An Emerging Strategic Triangle', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2008, pp. 41-57.

Uncertainties and 'Strategic Shocks'

This is not to say that the ultimate purpose of Chinese military modernisation does not present uncertainties. The United States has complained about lack of transparency in China's defence strategy and budget. Moreover Chinese doctrine can appear quite belligerent; the US Department of Defence argues that Chinese doctrine appears to leave open the idea of pre-emption.²⁵ Chinese language hints at growing global tensions. Its latest Defence White Paper states that 'struggles for strategic resources, strategic locations and strategic dominance have intensified...international military competition is becoming increasingly intense.'²⁶ Nevertheless, if China's broader policy of peaceful development continues, its military modernisation should not be destabilising in the foreseeable future.

Even so, the occurrence of strategic shocks that could spark regional instability cannot be ruled out. While by their nature strategic shocks are difficult to predict or define, perhaps the most destabilising event would be a US withdrawal from western Pacific. The absence of US military forces would force regional states to reassess the adequacy of their own military expenditure and posture.²⁷ Moreover the absence of US naval forces guaranteeing the global commons of secure sea lanes could encourage regional nations to assert control themselves. China's economic rise has benefited immensely from US protection of freedom of navigation – if China was forced to secure its sea lanes of communication itself, it could be drawn into conflict with other nations concerned about Chinese maritime encroachment.²⁸ Also, long-standing nationalist tensions over unresolved territorial disputes could reignite – even those that do not involve China.

So far, there have so far been no signs of a US withdrawal. In fact the US has been restructuring its force dispositions in Korea and Japan to make them more sustainable and arguably more capable and responsive in an East Asian conflict. Also the Obama

²⁵ According to China's broad understanding of conflict, the opponent's first 'blow' may not necessarily be military, meaning China's first use of military force may be justified in response to a non-military action. See *Military Power of the PRC*, p. 12.

²⁶ However, this can be read more as Chinese criticism of recent US actions in the Middle East – in some Chinese views the US is a practitioner of 'hegemonism' – than as predictions of future great power conflict. *China's National Defence in 2008*, Ch. I. 'The Security Situation'.

²⁷ Doubts over the sincerity of US's nuclear guarantees could prompt Japan to develop its own nuclear weapons – a development that China would not take lightly.

²⁸ There is a large cottage industry analysing China's efforts to solve its 'Malacca Dilemma' – its increasing dependence on oil transported by sea through the Malacca Straits. It would be interesting to speculate on whether China would feel more vulnerable or less vulnerable if the US withdrew from policing Indian Ocean and western Pacific Ocean sea lanes. See James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, 'China's Naval Ambitions in the Indian Ocean', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2008, pp. 367-394; You Ji, 'Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma: China's Effort to Protect Its Energy Supply', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2007, pp. 476-489; Mark Lanteigne, 'China's Maritime Security and the "Malacca Dilemma"', *Asian Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 143-161; and Gabriel Collins et al. (eds.), *China's Energy Strategy: The Impact on Beijing's Maritime Policies*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2008.

administration has reaffirmed the key planks of the San Francisco system and US alliances with key states such as Japan, South Korea and Australia are as strong as ever. But a strategic shock that forces a US withdrawal cannot be ruled out. This could be precipitated by heavy US casualties in a conflict with China over Taiwan, for example.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that China's growing military power will not destabilise the western Pacific. China's military capabilities are largely focused on deterring Taiwanese independence and US intervention in support of Taiwan, rather than threatening neighbouring states. China has a declared policy of peaceful development, and has demonstrated a willingness to work with the international community and its neighbours to resolve disputes. Finally, despite uncertainties about China's intentions and the purpose of its military development, China's neighbours do not regard China as a clear military threat and have not undertaken the kinds of activities that could antagonise China and lead to instability, such as significantly increasing their own defence expenditure or adopting explicit balancing or containment strategies. In sum, while it is important to continue to observe and assess China's intentions in the western Pacific, this paper finds it reasonable to conclude that China's recent actions will not lead to military conflict with its neighbours in this region.

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