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Is Chinese Military Modernization a Threat to the United States?

by Ivan Eland

Executive Summary

The ongoing modernization of the Chinese military poses less of a threat to the United States than recent studies by the Pentagon and a congressionally mandated commission have posited. Both studies exaggerate the strength of China's military by focusing on the modest improvements of specific sectors rather than the still-antiquated overall state of Chinese forces.

The state of the Chinese military and its modernization must also be put in the context of U.S. interests in East Asia and compared with the state and modernization of the U.S. military and other militaries in East Asia, especially the Taiwanese military. Viewed in that context, China's military modernization does not look especially threatening.

Although not officially calling its policy in East Asia "containment," the United States has ringed China with formal and informal alliances and a forward military presence. With such an extended defense perimeter, the United States considers as a threat to its interests any natural attempt by China—a rising power with a growing economy—to gain more control of its external environment by increasing defense spending. If U.S. policymakers would take a more restrained view of America's vital interests in the region, the measured Chinese military buildup would not appear so threatening. Conversely, U.S. policy may appear threatening to China. Even the Pentagon admits that China accelerated hikes in defense spending after the United States attacked Yugoslavia over the Kosovo issue in 1999.

The United States still spends about 10 times what China does on national defense—$400 billion versus roughly $40 billion per year—and is modernizing its forces much faster. In addition, much of the increase in China's official defense spending is soaked up by expenses not related to acquiring new weapons. Thus, China's spending on new armaments is equivalent to that of a nation that spends only $10 billion to $20 billion per year on defense. In contrast, the United States spends well over $100 billion per year to acquire new weapons.

Even without U.S. assistance, Taiwan's modern military could probably dissuade China from attacking. Taiwan does not have to be able to win a conflict; it needs only to make the costs of any attack unacceptable to China. The informal U.S. security guarantee is unneeded.

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Two recent studies on the Chinese military overstated the threat to the United States posed by that force.

Introduction

Both the Pentagon and a congressionally mandated commission recently issued studies on the Chinese military that overstated the threat to the United States posed by that force. The pessimism of both studies was understandable. The Department of Defense's study—the *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China*[1]—was issued by a federal bureaucracy that has an inherent conflict of interest in developing assessments of foreign military threats. Because the department that is creating the threat assessments is the same one that is lobbying Congress for money for weapons, personnel, fuel, and training to combat threats, its threat projections tend to be inflated. Because China, with an economy that is seemingly growing rapidly, is the rising great power on the horizon that should shape the future posture of American conventional forces (the brushfire wars needed to combat terrorism are likely to require only limited forces), the threat from China's armed forces is critical for bringing additional money into the Pentagon. The U.S.-China Security Review Commission's work—*The National Security Implications of the Economic Relationship between the United States and China*—drew at least partially on the Pentagon's effort and was written by anti-China hawks and those with a desire to restrict commerce with China.[2]

In contrast, this paper attempts to place the modernizing Chinese military in the context of a more balanced and limited view of U.S. strategic interests in East Asia. In addition, when the distorting perspectives of both studies are removed—that is, their focus on recent improvements in Chinese military capabilities rather than on the overall state of the Chinese military—the threat from the Chinese armed forces is shown to be modest. The bone-crushing dominance of the U.S. military remains intact. In fact, the Chinese military does not look all that impressive when compared even to the Taiwanese armed forces.

Putting the Modernizing Chinese Military in Context

Frequently, improvements in the Chinese military are reported in the world press without any attention to context. That is, those "flows" are highlighted but the "stock"—the overall state of the Chinese military—is ignored. The state of the Chinese military and how rapidly it is likely to improve will be examined in the second half of this paper. But first, additional context is needed.

Pockets of the Chinese military are now modernizing more rapidly than in the past, but compared to what? Both the modernization and the actual state of the Chinese military must be compared with those of the U.S. military and other militaries in the East Asian region (especially Taiwan's armed forces). In addition, the geopolitical and strategic environment in which Chinese military modernization is occurring needs to be examined. Western students of the Chinese military often speak abstractly about when growing Chinese military power will adversely affect "U.S. interests." It is very important to concretely define such interests because the wider the definition, the more likely even small increments of additional Chinese military power will threaten them.

U.S. Interests in East Asia

Even before President Bush's expansive new national security strategy was published, the United States perceived that it had a vital interest in maintaining in East Asia a continuous military presence that was deployed far forward. Despite the end of the Cold War, the United States has maintained Cold War–era alliances that encircle China; indeed, it has actually strengthened them. The United States has formal alliances with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia. In addition, the United States has an informal alliance with Taiwan—China's arch enemy—and a friendly strategic relationship with Singapore and New Zealand. In the post–Cold War era, as the military threat to

East Asia decreased, the United States strengthened its alliance with Japan by garnering a Japanese commitment to provide logistical support to the United States during any war in the theater. The Bush administration came into office with an even stronger predilection to enhance security alliances (especially the one with Japan) than its predecessor.[3]

Also, using the war on terrorism as part of its rationale, the Bush administration has expanded U.S. military presence in the areas surrounding China. Citing the need to fight the war on terrorism, the United States sent special forces to fight Abu Sayaf—a tiny group of bandits with only a tangential connection to the al-Qaeda terrorist movement—in order to strengthen the U.S. security relationship with the government of the Philippines. That security relationship had been diminished when the Philippine government ejected the U.S. military from its bases in the early 1990s. During the war against terrorism in Afghanistan, the United States established a "temporary" military presence on bases in Central Asian nations on China's western border. Given the Bush administration's use of the war on terrorism as a cover for deploying troops to Georgia and the Philippines and the history of the U.S. military presence in Japan, Germany, and South Korea, the U.S. military presence in those Central Asian nations will likely become permanent.

Before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the ensuing war in Afghanistan slowed the process, the administration was seeking better relations with India so as to use that country as a counterweight to a rising China. Finally, the war on terrorism has fostered a newly cooperative U.S.-Russian relationship, thus completing the encirclement of China. Moreover, the Pentagon is increasing the number of U.S. warships in the Pacific region.

Of course, the U.S. government does not admit to a policy of containing China, as it did with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. But in Asia the ring of U.S.-led alliances (formal and informal), a forward U.S. military presence, and closer American relationships with great powers capable of acting to balance against a rising China constitute a de facto containment policy. Such a policy is unwarranted by the current low threat posed by China and may actually increase the threat that it is designed to contain.

Even the DoD admits that the Chinese are recognizing and reacting to U.S. policy:

> China's leaders have asserted that the United States seeks to maintain a dominant geostrategic position by containing the growth of Chinese power, ultimately "dividing" and "Westernizing" China. . . . Beijing has interpreted the strengthening U.S.-Japan security alliance, increased U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region, and efforts to expand NATO as manifestations of Washington's strategy.[4]

The DoD report continues:

> Chinese analyses indicate a concern that Beijing would have difficulty managing potential U.S. military intervention in crises in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea. There are even indications of a concern that the United States might intervene in China's internal disputes with ethnic Tibetan or Muslim minorities. Chinese concerns about U.S. intervention likely have been reinforced by their perceptions of U.S. response to the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crises, Operation ALLIED FORCE in Kosovo, and more recent U.S.-led military operations to combat international terrorism. . . .
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> Following Operation ALLIED FORCE in 1999, Beijing seriously considered upgrading the priority attached to military modernization. While the senior leadership has since reaffirmed its stress on economic

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growth and development, it nevertheless agreed to provide significant additional resources and funding to support accelerated military modernization.[5]

And the Bush administration recently issued a national security strategy that shows that Chinese perceptions are largely correct. The new security strategy aims at ensuring U.S. primacy—that is, keeping the United States so powerful that other nations will be dissuaded from challenging it—and "preempting" (actually preventing) amorphous threats from nations that are developing or possess weapons of mass destruction.[6] Clearly, the portion of the White House's security strategy concerned with primacy is aimed at China, the rising great power that administration officials think is most likely to challenge the United States at some time in the future. Despite the grandiose nature of the strategy, however, the administration will probably not (one hopes) apply the "preemption" part of it to China—a nation possessing 20 long-range nuclear missiles that can hit the United States. In short, the de facto containment policy will probably continue to be followed.

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The extended defense perimeter that the United States continues to maintain in East Asia to carry out that containment policy shows a failure to recognize China's security concerns. Although China remains an authoritarian state (it is no longer a totalitarian state because the government no longer has total control over the economic sphere, and the average Chinese citizen is probably more free economically and politically than at any time since the communist government took power in 1949), conflict might be avoided if some understanding of the calculus of a potential adversary were shown. If a foreign nation had ringed the United States with alliances, friendships with potential adversaries, and an increasing military presence, the United States would feel very threatened—as was the case, for example, when the Soviets attempted to place nuclear missiles in nearby Cuba during the 1960s.

The United States fears any attempt by China to increase its influence in East or Southeast Asia. Yet, as the Chinese economy grows and China becomes a great power, it will naturally seek more control over its external environment. As Michael O'Hanlon and Bates Gill, both then at the Brookings Institution, perceptively noted, most of China's ambitions are not global and are no longer ideological; they are territorial and confined to exerting more regional influence over the islands and waterways to the south and southeast of its borders.[7] The United States could accommodate such limited ambitions as long as they did not snowball—an unlikely scenario—into a conflict that drastically altered the power balance in East Asia. China has given no indication that it would like to make an attempt at imperial conquest of East Asia.

In the past, wars occurred when an established power refused to acknowledge the great power status of a rising nation—for example, Britain's refusal to acknowledge the kaiser's Germany in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The United States should not make the same mistake with a rising China. China should be allowed, as all great powers do, to develop a sphere of influence in its own region—that is, East Asia. Within limits, an expanded sphere of Chinese influence should not threaten U.S. vital interests, if defined less grandiosely than at present.

Unfortunately, the United States regards even the smallest change in the status quo in East Asia (unless the change expands the already overextended U.S. defense perimeter) with suspicion. The United States does have a vital interest in ensuring a diffusion of power in East Asia so that no hegemonic great power—like imperial Japan in the 1930s—arises. But, unlike the situation before World War II, when China was weak and the French and British colonial powers were spread too thin, centers of power in East Asia other than the United States exist to balance a rising China. Japan, alone or in combination with South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, could balance against China.

The United States, instead of maintaining Cold War–era alliances and a forward military presence in the region, should gradually withdraw its forces from East Asia and allow those nations to be the first line of defense against China. Currently, those nations fail to spend enough on their security because the United States spends huge amounts on its military and is willing to subsidize their security for them (the effects of this ill-advised policy in perpetuating Taiwan's insufficient defense spending are discussed below).

Only if the balance of power in East Asia broke down with the advent of an aggressive hegemonic power should the United States intervene militarily in the affairs of the region. That policy would be called a "balancer-of-last-resort" strategy. Such a strategy would minimize the danger of a confrontation with China.

U.S. Military Capabilities Compared with Those of China

The Bush administration's national security strategy attempts to ensure American primacy by outspending other nations on defense many times over, thus dissuading them from competing with the United States. The United States is already more powerful militarily relative to other nations of the world than the Roman, Napoleonic, or British Empire was at its height. According to the national security strategy, "Today, the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence."[8] And the Bush administration would like to keep such U.S. military dominance by profligate spending on military might that is deployed around the world. The history of international relations indicates that this strategy has little chance of succeeding. Historically, when threatened by a country that had become too powerful, nations banded together to balance against it. Of course, administration officials claim that the United States is a benevolent power and that other nations will feel no need to balance against it. Such countries as Russia, India, and especially China might disagree. For example, China accuses the United States of maintaining a policy of containment, and Russia has protested the expansion of the NATO alliance up to its borders. A good place for more sustainable and less threatening U.S. policies to start is in East Asia.

Forces and Defense Spending. Currently, the United States maintains about 100,000 military personnel in East Asia. That military presence is centered in Japan (41,000), South Korea (37,000), and afloat (19,000). At sea, the United States stations one carrier battle group and one Marine amphibious group forward in the region and will now ensure that a second carrier group will be there more of the time. The United States will also augment the number of nuclear submarines stationed in Guam. That military presence seems small compared to the military forces of China, which has active forces of 2.3 million.

Yet the U.S. military presence deployed forward in East Asia is only the tip of the iceberg. That presence is a symbol of U.S. interest in the region and of the world-dominant U.S. military juggernaut that could be brought to bear against the large, but largely antiquated, Chinese military during any war between the two nations.

The United States spends about $400 billion a year on national defense and alone accounts for about 40 percent of the world's defense spending. There is some dispute about how much China spends because not all of its defense spending (for example, funds for weapons research and procurement of foreign weapons) is reflected in the official Chinese defense budget.[9] David Shambaugh, a prominent academic authority on the Chinese military, estimates total Chinese defense spending at about $38 billion per year.[10] In the same ballpark, the International Institute of Strategic Studies' *Military Balance* estimates such spending at $47 billion per year.[11] In contrast, the U.S. Department of Defense's estimate is predictably much higher—noting that annual Chinese military spending *'could* total $65 billion."[12] Because Shambaugh and the IISS do not build weapon systems to combat

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threats and thus have no inherent conflict of interest, their independent estimates are probably less prone to threat inflation than is DoD's estimate.

China has had real (inflation-adjusted) increases in defense spending only since 1997. Chinese military expenditures are constrained by limits on the ability of China's central government to collect revenues and the concomitant budget deficit.[13] Moreover, increases in military spending have been surpassed by rapid Chinese economic growth, leading to declines in defense spending as a proportion of gross domestic product.

The $38 billion to $47 billion range is roughly what other medium powers, such as Japan, France, and the United Kingdom, spend on defense. But the militaries of those other nations are much smaller and more modern than the obsolete Chinese military, which needs to be completely transformed from a guerrilla-style Maoist people's army into a modern force that emphasizes projection of power on the sea and in the air. (Since the early 1990s, the Chinese have reoriented their military doctrine from "fighting a people's war under modern conditions" to fighting and winning a high-technology war against a modern opponent.)[14] So the Chinese must spend much of their increases in official defense funding to prop up their sagging, oversized force and slowly convert it to a force that can project power, to meet escalating payroll requirements to compete with the thriving Chinese private sector, and to compensate the military for "off-the-books" revenues lost when the Chinese political leadership ordered the armed forces to stop running commercial businesses.

Consequently, China's spending to acquire weapons is equivalent only to that of countries with total defense budgets of $10 billion to $20 billion.[15] Given that the United States, with a gargantuan budget for the research, development, and procurement of weapons—well over $100 billion per year[16]—is leaving its rich NATO allies behind in technology (there is fear in NATO that U.S. capabilities are so far advanced that the U.S. armed forces would not be able to operate with allied militaries), it most surely is leaving China in the dust.

The Chinese Defense Industry. The Chinese defense industry remains state owned, is grossly inefficient, and has had an abysmal track record of developing and producing technologically sophisticated weaponry. Thus, when press articles, hawkish analysts, or even the DoD notes China's pursuit of "asymmetric" technologies (ways that the weak can attack the vulnerabilities of the strong)—such as anti-satellite systems, information warfare, and radio frequency weapons (nonnuclear devices that generate electromagnetic pulses, much like those of a nuclear blast, that neutralize enemy electronics)—it does not mean that the Chinese efforts will be successful. In fact, most of the significant technological progress in the Chinese military has resulted from weapons purchases from Russia. In other words, the $1 billion or $2 billion a year China spends on Russian weapon systems—which so alarms anti-China hawks in the United States—is actually a sign of weakness in the Chinese defense industrial base. For example, China's purchase of Russian Kilo diesel submarines probably indicates that significant problems exist with China's homegrown Song-class submarine program.

Even when the Chinese buy advanced weapon systems abroad, they have difficulty integrating them into their forces. For example, the Chinese have had problems integrating the Russian-designed Su-27 fighter into their air force.[17] As in many other militaries of the Third World, deficiencies in Chinese training, doctrine, and maintenance for sophisticated arms do not allow the full exploitation of such systems.

Military Equipment. Although the best crude measure of a nation's military power is probably its defense spending (because it includes money spent for the all-important "intangibles," such as pay, training, ammunition, maintenance of equipment), a nation's military capital stock—the dollar value of its military hardware—is a measure of its force's

modernity. The U.S. military's capital stock is almost $1 trillion. In contrast, despite the purchase of some sophisticated Russian weapons, the capital stock of the largely obsolete Chinese military is only one-tenth of that total—well under $100 billion. In fact, China has fewer top-of-the-line weapons than middle powers, such as Japan and the United Kingdom, and smaller powers, such as Italy, the Netherlands, and South Korea.[18] A further measure of a military's true capability is based on how much is spent per soldier (for training, weapons, and the like). Even when calculated from the inflated DoD estimate of Chinese defense spending—$65 billion per year—China's spending is less than $33,000 per troop, whereas the United States spends $213,208 and Japan spends $192,649.[19]

That disparity in value mirrors a wide gap in capabilities. In contrast to the thoroughly modern U.S. military, China's armed forces have been able to modernize only slowly and in pockets. According to DoD, the Chinese have a large air force—3,400 combat aircraft—but only about 100 are modern fourth-generation aircraft[20] (for example, the Russian-designed Su-27 and Su-30). Most Chinese aircraft incorporate technology from the 1950s or 1960s. In contrast, all of the more than 3,000 aircraft in the U.S. air services are fourth-generation aircraft (F-14s, F-15s, F-16s, and F-18C/Ds), and fifth-generation aircraft (F-22s and F-18E/Fs) are already beginning production. Even Chinese pilots who fly the limited number of fourth-generation fighters get only 180 flying hours of training per year (the pilots of older aircraft get much less); U.S. fighter pilots average 205 flying hours per year.[21]

The Chinese army is still an oversized, outdated Maoist guerrilla army with insufficient airlift, logistics, engineering, and medical capabilities to project power very far. In fact, most of the Chinese army is good only for internal security purposes. The force's equipment is antiquated—for example, most tanks incorporate technology from the 1950s. Because of nepotism, party favoritism, and poor pay compared to that in the booming private sector, the army does not get the best recruits from Chinese society, and morale of existing troops is bad. In contrast, the United States has the most potent and technologically sophisticated army in the world—with the best tank in the world (the M-1), the potent Apache anti-tank helicopter, and future plans to add the Comanche reconnaissance helicopter.

According to DoD, the Chinese navy appears to have postponed indefinitely plans to buy an aircraft carrier. In addition, DoD notes that the Chinese navy's air defense against enemy aircraft, precision-guided munitions, and cruise missiles is limited by short-range weapons (only a few of China's ships have longer-range surface-to-air missiles) and a lack of modern air surveillance systems and advanced data links to communicate that "air picture" to other ships in the fleet.[22] The purchase of a few SOVREMENNYY-class destroyers from Russia will not alter that state of affairs significantly. In modern war, ships are vulnerable to attack from the air, and those limitations make the Chinese navy a sitting duck in any conflict. In contrast, the U.S. fleet has global dominance with 12 large aircraft carriers (Russia is the only other nation with a large aircraft carrier, which is confined to port most of the time), the best submarines in the world, and the most sophisticated air defense capabilities afloat (Aegis destroyers and cruisers).

The Chinese are slowly modernizing their small strategic nuclear arsenal to make it less vulnerable to a preemptive attack from the world's most potent nuclear force—the U.S. strategic arsenal of thousands of warheads. But even with such modernization, China's nuclear arsenal will pale in comparison with the robust U.S. nuclear force. The Chinese currently have only about 20 long-range missiles—housed in fixed silos—that can reach the United States. The missiles, their liquid fuel, and their warheads are stored separately, making them very vulnerable to a preemptive strike before they could be assembled and launched.[23] During the Cold War, analysts saw as destabilizing a situation in which one side had

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vulnerable nuclear weapons. That nation might use the weapons in haste to avoid losing them during an opponent's first strike. So, as long as the Chinese do not undertake a massive nuclear buildup to achieve parity with the United States (which they cannot afford and have shown no inclination to do), the modernization of China's nuclear weapons by the fielding of more invulnerable road-mobile missiles could actually increase the nuclear stability between China and the United States. China has not yet fielded a missile with multiple warheads, but it could in the future—especially if the United States deployed missile defenses that needed to be countered and the Chinese mastered the technology of lightweight warheads similar to the U.S. W-88 warhead. But because Chinese missiles with multiple warheads would be mobile, and thus survivable, they would be less likely to be a lucrative, destabilizing target than the Cold War situation of multiple warheads per fixed silo.

The Chinese have only one ballistic missile submarine, which usually remains at the dock for repairs. Even at sea, to fire its missiles, the submarine must operate fairly close to the United States—where it would be more vulnerable to attack. In contrast, the United States has 14 ballistic missile submarines that are the most powerful weapon systems ever built and can launch their missiles at a target from across the ocean. The Chinese have a successor ballistic missile submarine in development, but they have never had much luck perfecting the technology. The only time China's small nuclear arsenal could become a problem for the United States would be in an emotional Chinese reaction to U.S. intervention in a crisis between China and Taiwan.

A Massive Military Buildup? David Shambaugh maintains that the Chinese are not engaged in a massive Soviet-style military buildup.[24] Even the Defense Intelligence Agency and high-ranking U.S. military officials seem to agree with that assessment. According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, by 2010, even the best 10 percent of the Chinese military will have equipment that is more than 20 years behind the capabilities of the U.S. military (equivalent to U.S. equipment in the late 1980s). The other 90 percent of the Chinese military will have even more outdated equipment.[25] Gen. William J. Begert, the commander of U.S. Pacific Air Forces, asserted that Chinese military modernization was a "matter of concern" but not alarming.[26] His boss, Adm. Dennis Blair, the commander of all U.S. forces in the Pacific, noted in 1999 that China would not pose a serious strategic threat to the United States for at least two decades.[27] O'Hanlon and Gill also conclude that the Chinese military lags behind U.S. forces by at least 20 years and that it will be that long before China's armed forces could significantly challenge the United States and allied nations in East Asia.[28] Even DoD has admitted that "the PLA [People's Liberation Army] is still decades from possessing a comprehensive capability to engage and defeat a modern adversary beyond China's boundaries."[29]

The assessments of DoD, Blair, and O'Hanlon and Gill are most likely predicated on the excessively expansive conception of U.S. interests in East Asia that currently holds sway in U.S. foreign policy circles. If a more restrained view of U.S. interests in the region were adopted, the slow Chinese military modernization would be even less threatening to the United States.

Chinese leaders have clearly learned a lesson from the implosion of the Soviet regime, which was largely caused by the dysfunctional socialist economy sagging under the weight of excessive military spending. Even the Pentagon admits that the Chinese leadership is focused primarily on economic development and has given the modernization of China's military a priority below development in industry, agriculture, and science and technology.[30] DoD acknowledges that the Chinese military is modernizing selectively rather than massively:

> Rather than shifting priority resources from civil infrastructure and economic reform programs to an across-the-board modernization of the PLA, Beijing is focused on those programs and assets which will

> give China the most effective means for exploiting vulnerabilities in an adversary's military capabilities.[31]

The Pentagon has also conceded that the additional funding the Chinese leadership provided to the military for modernization accelerated after the U.S.-led attack in Kosovo in 1999.[32] Thus, provocative U.S. actions lead to precisely the Chinese response that the United States would most like to avoid.

Although in the last few years the Chinese have been modernizing their military more rapidly than in the past, recent hikes in the U.S. budget for national defense have been extraordinary. The increase in the U.S. budget for national defense in 2003 alone is of approximately the same magnitude as the entire Chinese defense budget (if the most probable estimates are accepted). And much of the increase in official Chinese defense spending is allocated to maintaining a bloated Chinese military until it can be transformed, escalating payroll requirements to attempt to stay apace with the salaries in the booming Chinese private sector, and compensating the Chinese armed forces for off-the-books revenues lost when the Chinese leadership forced the divestiture of military holdings in private businesses—rather than to new weapons research, development, and production. The United States spends more than $40 billion a year on research and development for weapons (again, roughly equal to total annual Chinese defense spending) and more than $60 billion yearly on weapons procurement.[33] Thus, the speed of U.S. military modernization dwarfs the pace of improvements in parts of the antiquated Chinese forces. In fact, U.S. military modernization is outpacing even that of wealthy NATO allies—the next most capable militaries on the planet. In the war in Afghanistan, U.S. military commanders were reluctant to operate with allied militaries because of the disparity in capabilities.

In conclusion, even though the Chinese military is modernizing more rapidly than in the past, the speed of the modernization is less than that of the modernization of the already vastly superior U.S. force. In other words, despite all of the clamor in the press and in the U.S. government about Chinese military modernization, the U.S. military is way ahead and the gap is actually widening (the same situation holds when U.S. armed forces are compared with all of the other militaries in the world). When pressed, even anti-China hawks admit that Chinese military capabilities are far behind those of the United States.[34]

Of course, the Chinese military is also often compared with the armed forces of Taiwan because that is the most likely arena for an East Asian war. The usual implication of such comparisons is that the capabilities of the Chinese military—made possible by China's larger and seemingly faster-growing economy—will eventually outpace those of Taiwan and threaten the island's security. That conclusion is overly simplistic.

Chinese Military Modernization and Its Implications for Taiwan

China's economy is now four times the size of Taiwan's ($1.2 trillion versus about $300 billion)[35] and is growing faster (if you believe the official Chinese government data, which some analysts find suspect). That economic disparity could, at least theoretically, be turned into a military disparity. But according to the Pentagon, Taiwan's strategy is to enhance key aspects of its military capabilities—counterblockade operations, air superiority over the Taiwan Strait, and defense against amphibious and aerial assault on the island—and buy time for positive political changes to occur in China that will ease tensions with Taiwan.[36]

The Taiwanese certainly could do more than they currently do to ensure their security. Defense expenditures have actually been declining as a percentage of Taiwanese government spending. The Taiwanese fail to do more to enhance their own defenses because they

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believe that the United States will come to their aid if a crisis occurs with China. Although U.S. policy is ambiguous on that point, President Bush made it less ambiguous by saying the United States would do "whatever it took" to defend Taiwan, and, in 1996, President Clinton sent two U.S. aircraft carriers into the Taiwan Strait after the Chinese splashed missiles there to intimidate Taiwan.

President Bush's pledge to do "whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan is dubious. The security of Taiwan has never been vital to the United States, and dueling with a nuclear-armed power in any crisis over the small island would be ill-advised. In any conflict between China and the United States over the island, escalation to nuclear war is a possibility. Although the United States possesses thousands of nuclear warheads that could hit China and the Chinese have only about 20 warheads that can reach the United States, China cares much more about Taiwan than does the United States and could even be irrational about the issue.

During the 1996 crisis in the Taiwan Strait, after the United States deployed two aircraft carriers near Taiwan, a Chinese official told Chas Freeman, a former U.S. diplomat, that the Chinese were prepared to use nuclear weapons against the U.S. West Coast if the United States intervened on behalf of Taiwan.[37] Although coming to the defense of a fellow democracy against an authoritarian Chinese regime has emotional appeal, U.S. policymakers have to ask themselves whether they are willing to trade Los Angeles to save Taipei. The answer should be a resounding no. The United States should sell Taiwan the arms it needs for self-defense but should not guarantee its security. Besides, Taiwan's security is not as hopeless without U.S. assistance as many analysts and press articles make it seem.

Hostile behavior toward Taiwan could disturb China's increasing economic linkage with the rest of the world—especially growing commercial links with Taiwan. Because China's highest priority is economic growth, the disruption of such economic relationships is a disincentive for aggressive Chinese actions vis-à-vis Taiwan. Any attack short of invasion (using missiles or instituting a naval blockade) would likely harm the Taiwanese economy and disrupt Chinese trade and financial contacts with Taiwan and other developed nations without getting China what it most wants—control of Taiwan. An amphibious invasion—in the unlikely event that it succeeded—would provide such control but would cause even greater disruption in China's commercial links to developed nations.

Despite all of the clamor in the press and in the U.S. government about Chinese military modernization, the U.S. military is way ahead and the gap is actually widening.

Amphibious Assault

An amphibious assault on Taiwan is the least likely Chinese military option because of its low probability of success. Even without U.S. assistance, the Taiwanese have the advantage of defending an island. An amphibious assault—that is, attacking over water and landing against defended positions—is one of the hardest and most risky military operations to execute. In the Normandy invasion of 1944, the Allies had strategic surprise, air and naval supremacy, crushing naval gunfire support, and a ground force coming ashore that was vastly superior in numbers to that of the Germans. Yet even with all those advantages, the Allies had some difficulty establishing beachheads. In any amphibious assault on Taiwan, China would be unlikely to have strategic surprise, air or naval supremacy (Taiwanese air and naval forces are currently superior to those of the Chinese),[38] or sufficient naval gunfire support, and its landing force would be dwarfed by the Taiwanese army and reserves. Also, China has insufficient amphibious forces, dedicated amphibious ships to carry them to Taiwan's shores, and naval air defense to protect an amphibious flotilla from Taiwan's superior air force. According to the study by Swaine and Mulvenon of RAND, "Mainland China will likely remain unable to undertake such massive attack over the medium-term, and perhaps, over the long-term as well."[39] In addition, probably for the next two decades, China's lack of an integrated air defense system could leave its homeland open to retaliatory attacks by the

Taiwanese air force, which could deter a Chinese attack on Taiwan in the first place. In the long term, even if China overcomes those deficiencies and Taiwan lags behind China in military improvements, the Taiwanese could use a "porcupine strategy" against a superior foe. That is, the Taiwanese armed forces would not have to be strong enough to win a war with the Chinese military; they would only have to be able to inflict enough damage to raise the cost of a Chinese invasion significantly. In this regard, Taiwan may be helped by modern technology. Sea mines, precision-guided munitions (including anti-ship cruise missiles), and satellite reconnaissance, which makes surprise difficult, may render any amphibious assault an exceptionally bloody affair. In fact, some defense analysts believe that such technology has made large-scale amphibious assaults a thing of the past.

Naval Blockade

Although more likely than an amphibious invasion of Taiwan, a naval blockade using Chinese submarines and surface ships would face some of the same problems as an amphibious flotilla. The poor air defenses on Chinese surface ships would render them vulnerable to attack by superior Taiwanese air power. In addition, Chinese naval command and control is probably inadequate to manage a naval quarantine. Although China has more submarines and surface warships in its navy than does Taiwan, the Taiwanese navy has superior surveillance and anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare capabilities. Currently, the Chinese might very well be able to disrupt Taiwan's commerce to a limited extent with their modest mine-laying capability and submarine attacks (submarines are less susceptible than surface vessels to attack from the air), but even establishing a partial blockade of certain ports would be difficult. By 2025, Swaine and Mulvenon predict that China could deny the use of the sea and air out to 500 nautical miles from China's coastline and attempt a naval blockade within 200 nautical miles of that coastline.[40] So even in 2025, China might not be able to enforce a complete naval quarantine of Taiwan.

Intimidation with Missile Launches or Actual Attacks

In 1996 China tried to intimidate Taiwan with missile tests in the Taiwan Strait during Chinese military "exercises" at the time of the Taiwanese presidential elections. Those actions had the opposite effect of that intended—the election outcome was not what the Chinese government had desired. Actual missile attacks on Taiwan for the purpose of terrorizing the Taiwanese population would probably cause an even greater backlash against China in Taiwan and the international community and could trigger retaliatory raids on the mainland by the superior Taiwanese air force. Neither the accuracy nor the numbers of Chinese missiles now permit them to have a significant effect when used against Taiwanese military targets. As Chinese missiles become more numerous and accurate, such missile attacks would become more militarily consequential. But passive defense measures could reduce significantly the effectiveness of Chinese missile attacks on military targets.

Rather than provide an informal security guarantee for Taiwan, the United States should sell Taiwan the arms to defend itself. President Bush has authorized the sale of a greater number of weapon systems to Taiwan than President Clinton approved. But Taiwan has been slow to come up with the money to buy many of them. Taiwan needs to do more for its own defense but will not if the United States continues to informally guarantee Taiwan's security.

Implications for the United States: China's Relations with Other Neighbors

According to Christopher A. McNally and Charles E. Morrison, authors of *Asia Pacific Security Outlook 2002*, China has steadily

The security of Taiwan has never been vital to the United States, and dueling with a nuclear-armed power in any crisis over the small island would be ill-advised.

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improved relations with countries sharing its land borders, but the Chinese still have issues with their maritime neighbors. In 2001 the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic created the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that was designed to increase cooperation in regional security, economic relations, culture, science, education, and environmental protection. In addition, China signed the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation with Russia, which pledged, among other things, that the two nations would not use force in disputes and would not target missiles at each other. China's relations with former foes—India and Vietnam—have warmed with growing economic relations and high-level visits.[41] In general, such arrangements contribute to the security of the regions involved. The military cooperation between China and Russia bears watching, but it is only exacerbated by the unstated U.S. policy of containing China with encircling alliances and a continuing forward military presence in East Asia.

According to James Holt, an analyst for the World Policy Institute, China's military is qualitatively inferior to that of Russia, India, Vietnam, and Taiwan and would lose any war against any of those nations. In particular, since the 1960s India has more than doubled the size of its military and modernized its armed forces to a greater extent than China. In addition, Holt argues that for the last 30 years China's military power has also been declining vis-à-vis that of the United States, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. Holt maintains that unless China at least doubles real military spending, its rate of weapons purchases in relation to the size of its armed forces is so low that its military will continue to decline relative to those of the United States, Taiwan, India, Japan, and South Korea.[42] This need is caused by the low percentage of Chinese defense expenditures that is currently allocated to the acquisition of weapons.

In contrast to China's improving relations with its neighbors on land, its dispute with a maritime neighbor, the Philippines, over islands in the South China Sea continues. But the dispute is contained because both nations want to avoid spillover effects into their bilateral political and economic relationships, according to McNally and Morrison.[43] China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations recently signed an agreement to manage such territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In any event, according to DoD, the Chinese navy is inferior to other regional navies in most technologies, especially surveillance; air defense; and command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C^4I).[44] Therefore, those navies—alone or in concert—should be able to contain any Chinese adventurism, should negotiations fail. In the end, however, who owns the small island chains in the South China Sea, or the resources under the waters surrounding them, is not important to the security of the United States. The United States should not interfere in efforts to negotiate a peaceful solution to the problem.

Conclusion

Although many alarmist articles in the press have trumpeted improvements in the Chinese military, those enhancements are pockets of modernization in a largely antiquated force. China's military modernization is more rapid than before but is not a massive Soviet-style military buildup. As the Chinese economy grows and China becomes a great power, the United States should accept that it, like other great powers, will want more influence over its region. If kept within bounds, that increased sphere of influence should not threaten vital U.S. interests.

But the United States, especially under the Bush administration's new expansive national security strategy of primacy and preemption, sees any change in the status quo in East Asia as a threat to its expansive list of vital interests. If the United States unnecessarily maintains, or even continues to expand, its defense perimeter to surround and contain China, the rising

power and the status quo power—both armed with nuclear weapons—may come into needless conflict. The United States must take a less grandiose view of its vital interests, redraw its defense perimeter, abrogate its Cold War–era alliances (including the informal alliance with nonstrategic Taiwan), and reverse its military buildup. Currently, the United States is unnecessarily modernizing its armed forces faster than is China, which is starting from an extremely low level of military modernity. China, whose highest priority is economic development, is now reacting to the expansion of the U.S. defense perimeter and the U.S. military buildup by increasing its own defense budget more rapidly. Thus, U.S. policy may be engendering the threat it most fears.

Notes

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2. China Security Review Commission, *Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Review Commission—The National Security Implications of the Economic Relationship between the United States and China,* July 2002, Appendix 2, pp. 1–6. Members of the commission included Chairman Richard D'Amato, a former foreign policy counsel for Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.); Vice Chairman Michael Ledeen, from the hawkish American Enterprise Institute; George Becker, former president of the United Steelworkers of America; Stephen Bryen, former chief of the Pentagon's office with jurisdiction over controls on technology exports; Patrick Mulloy, former head of the Commerce Department's office responsible for ensuring foreign compliance with trade agreements; William Reinsch, former head of the Commerce Department's office to administer and enforce export control policies and former legislative assistant to Sen. John Rockefeller (D-W.Va.); Roger Robinson Jr., senior staff member at the National Security Council during the Reagan administration; Arthur Waldron, director of Asian studies at the American Enterprise Institute; Michael Wessel, former staff member in the office of Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.); and Larry Wortzel, director of the Asian Studies Center at the hawkish Heritage Foundation.

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10. David Shambaugh, Remarks at the Cato Institute's Policy Forum, "Is China's Military Modernization a Threat to the United States?" September 9, 2002, www.cato.org/events/020909pf.html.

11. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance: 2002–2003* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 298.

12. DoD, *Military Power of the PRC,* p. 38. Emphasis added.

13. China Security Review Commission, chap. 9, p. 2.

14. Muthiah Alagappa, "Military Professionalism in Asia: Ascendance of the Old Professionalism," in *Military Professionalism in Asia: Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives,* ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2001), p. 184.

15. Gill and O'Hanlon, p. 8.

16. International Institute for Strategic Studies, p. 241.

17. China Security Review Commission, chap. 10, p. 4.

18. Gill and O'Hanlon, pp. 3, 8.

19. China Security Review Commission, chap. 9, p. 4.

20. DoD, *Military Power of the PRC,* p. 15.

21. International Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 22, 147.

22. DoD, *Military Power of the PRC,* p. 20.

23. For more on this point, see Ivan Eland, "Tilting at Windmills: Post–Cold War Military Threats to U.S. Security," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 332, February 8, 1999, p. 24.

24. Shambaugh.

25. Cited in Gill and O'Hanlon, p. 4.

26. Quoted in "China Less Aggressive toward Surveillance Planes," *Washington Post,* August 24, 2002, p. A9.

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31. DoD, *The Security Situation in the Taiwan Strait,* p. 3.

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