

Chinese Military Power: What Vexes the United States and Why?

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***Abstract:** The enhancement of Chinese military power over the past decade is generating ample debate over its meaning and consequences for American security interests. China's characterization in larger conceptions of U.S. national security strategy has experienced repeated shifts over the decades. China is now an arrived major power according to virtually all relevant power criteria, without U.S. policy makers conclusively resolving the implications of China's military modernization for American security interests. Comparable uncertainties bedevil Chinese thinking about American military power. The latent elements of strategic rivalry (if not outright confrontation) are beyond dispute, and could readily take deeper root in the bureaucratic processes of both countries. Without leaders in both systems fully imparting and communicating to one another their respective strategic equities in Asia and the Pacific, the emergence of a reconfigured regional security order fully accepted by both states remains very uncertain.*

After an extended post-September 11 hiatus, China's military modernization and its presumed strategic objectives are again on the U.S. policy radar screen. China's accelerated military development and the supposed obscurity of Beijing's long-term national security goals both feature prominently in U.S. concerns. There is a clear need for analysts and policy makers to understand Chinese capabilities in a realistic light, beginning with the context, attributes, and prevailing directions of China's military modernization. Grounded, realistic explanations of Chinese military modernization are apparent among some U.S. officials, but China's military advancement is also being employed to validate and advance narrower policy and institutional agendas. Moreover, American policy makers have yet to meaningfully address an even larger long-term issue: is the U.S. prepared to move toward a future concept of international security that does not assume unambiguous U.S.

strategic dominance, and (if not) what does the U.S. propose to do about it? This question pertains at present to long-term relations with China, but it will increasingly shape U.S. relations with other major powers aspiring to strategic autonomy in the 21st century, in particular, India and Russia.

Chinese policy making is also not immune to self-serving policy and institutional rationales. American defense programs are validating and sustaining increased Chinese military efforts across a diverse spectrum of programs and activities. China's anti-satellite test (ASAT) of January 2007 fits in this context.¹ The delayed Chinese acknowledgment of the test was strikingly divergent from China's repeated statements opposing the "weaponization of outer space." The test was the evident product of many years of research and experimentation within Chinese military R&D, the requisite inter-agency coordination, and without senior officials weighing fully the potential policy reverberations following the test. Though there are signs of increased awareness among some officials in Beijing about the potential effects of China's growing military power on the interests and strategic calculations of external powers, narrower institutional priorities are also shaping Chinese programs, and could readily trigger larger consequences that would undermine Beijing's larger strategic objectives. There is mounting evidence of debate among informed Chinese specialists on the purposes and priorities underlying military modernization. Chinese security policy may still be formally decided atop the system, but the increasing diversity of viewpoints within the system suggests that central guidance is far less authoritative than in the past. The belief that Chinese policy making operates with control rigorously exercised at the apex of the system thus seems increasingly quaint.

Beijing's reemergence as a major power also reflects larger changes underway within China and in its relationship with the outside world. Unlike the former Soviet Union, it is a "dual capable" major power ever more integrated in global economics, politics, and security, and upon whom Washington relies to address critical regional issues, most notably efforts to inhibit and reverse North Korea's nuclear weapons development. It is a rapidly modernizing state that combines reformist policies oriented toward market-led growth, while the leadership simultaneously hopes to preserve the Party's political prerogatives, amidst societal dynamics that the leadership is increasingly less able to control. China is an ever larger magnet for trade and foreign direct investment with the U.S. and a major enabler of U.S. deficit spending through its large-scale purchases of U.S. Treasury notes, while it also seeks to ensure unequivocal strategic autonomy from the United States. Last but not least, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is increasingly able to complicate,

¹ "Chinese Military Messages," International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) *Strategic Comments*, February 2007; and Phillip C. Saunders and Charles D. Lutes, *China's ASAT Test: Motivations and Implications* (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University Special Report, June 2007).

inhibit, or directly challenge the employment of American military power in areas contiguous to China, with contingencies related to Taiwan the clear focus of such efforts. These multiple policy considerations and the inherent contradictions in how the U.S. addresses China's political, economic, and military ascendance do not have a ready precedent or parallel in U.S. relations with any other state. A fuller understanding of U.S. policy dilemmas also needs to review some of the history that has brought both countries and both militaries to their present circumstances: Americans may have forgotten or dismissed much of this history, but Chinese have not. One conclusion seems inescapable: Chinese and American defense planning and their effects on the military strategies of both states will be pivotal factors in future bilateral ties.

This paper will explore three issues. First, I will summarize U.S. defense strategy toward China during the early decades of the Cold War, and then describe the implications of Sino-American normalization for the planning assumptions of both states. Second, I will review the primary factors that have altered the framework of defense planning between the United States and China over the past decade and a half. Third, I will highlight some of the dominant characteristics of contemporary defense thinking in both systems, and how they could shape longer-term outcomes in Sino-American relations.

U.S. Assessments of Chinese Strategy: The Cold War and Beyond

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the United States deemed China its primary political-military adversary in East Asia. This led the United States to adopt (at least in broad conceptual terms) a “two and a half war” defense strategy. This was judged appropriate when Beijing was allied with the Soviet Union in the 1950s, and it was redefined only marginally after the shattering of the Sino-Soviet alliance at the end of the decade. However, the conflict in Korea (1950-1953) sobered both leaderships on the risks and implications of renewed warfare. There were indisputable strategic and operational constraints imposed on both leaderships in the Taiwan Strait during the 1950s and in the subsequent U.S. escalation in Vietnam.² But China's presumed revolutionary ambitions in Asia were a primary justification for U.S. “pactomania” across the region and for the large scale deployment of U.S. forces on air, land, and sea around the periphery of China. This was well understood in Chinese strategic assessments, as these issues dominated Chinese security planning throughout the 1950s and much of the 1960s. It was only with the militarization

²For insightful examinations by two senior Chinese and American scholars, consult Zhang Baijia, “‘Resist America’: China's Role in The Korean and Vietnam Wars,” and Allen S. Whiting, “U.S. Crisis Management Vis-à-vis China: Korea and Vietnam,” in Michael D. Swaine and Zhang Tuosheng (eds.) with Danielle F.S. Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006, pp. 179–213 and 215–249 respectively.

of the Sino-Soviet dispute in the mid and late 1960s that American planners began to ponder seriously the implications of the political-military confrontation between Moscow and Beijing for U.S. security interests. (China's nascent nuclear weapons capabilities were a separate concern of American strategic planners, but space limitations preclude consideration of this issue.)

Once the Sino-American rapprochement began in earnest during the early 1970s, the Nixon Administration wasted little time in adjusting its defense strategies toward China. With U.S. military involvement in Vietnam receding and with Washington and Beijing moving toward larger political and strategic understandings related to Taiwan, the United States shifted to a "one and a half war" defense strategy, effectively removing China from detailed U.S. military planning in East Asia. Planning for Korean contingencies remained a partial exception to this development. For all practical purposes, however, China was no longer deemed a plausible U.S. adversary, a trend immeasurably strengthened by the normalization of Sino-American relations at the end of 1978, the withdrawal of the residual U.S. military presence from Taiwan, and China's demilitarization of the coastal regions opposite Taiwan. Thus, Chinese military power had ceased to be a major preoccupation for American defense planners.

The accommodation between the United States and China and the growing American realization of the backwardness of China's defense technology base meant that Chinese military capabilities did not pose an inherent or insuperable risk to American regional security interests. If anything, a weaker China was deemed adverse to U.S. security interests, since Beijing was then presumably far more vulnerable to Soviet pressure or outright coercion. China therefore served as a tacit ally of the United States during the 1980s, with Washington actively facilitating China's scientific and technological advancement, including the Reagan Administration's decision to directly assist China's military modernization in four separate mission areas. In a remarkable display of historical amnesia, this entire history went unmentioned in the Cox Committee report of 1999, charged with investigating allegations of illicit Chinese acquisition of American high technology and nuclear weapons design data.³ The report's authors chose to ignore the fact that the enhancement of Chinese technological and defense capabilities *was* deemed directly beneficial to American national security interests for more than a decade, by Republican and Democratic administrations alike. With the United States intent on cultivating China as a counterweight to Soviet power in Asia (or at least hoping to render China a substantial, continuing preoccupation for Soviet military planners), few officials in Washington considered whether or how China might adversely affect American regional security interests at some future date.

China's military development during the 1970s and 1980s proceeded at a desultory pace, and was judged either inconsequential or marginally advan-

³ Jonathan D. Pollack, "The Cox Report's 'Dirty Little Secret'," *Arms Control Today*, April/May 1999, pp. 26–27, 34.

tageous to American security interests. China's military capabilities (though not its weapons sales, involvement in missile proliferation or nuclear technology transfers to Pakistan) were considered largely tangential to U.S. national security interests. With China's predominant energies focused on economic development and threat reduction with its neighbors, there seemed little reason to modify American policy. Deng Xiaoping's strategic reassessment of 1985 reinforced these judgments.⁴ China's leaders no longer characterized major war (let alone global war) as inevitable, and China's future military development was explicitly subordinated to the requirements of economic modernization. Though some senior leaders still expressed concerns about China's relative weakness, the implications for military modernization were largely deferred to a later date. For Washington, China's future military development was a decidedly back-burner issue. For Beijing, America's future military development (beyond concerns about U.S. arms sales to Taiwan) barely registered on the radar screen. By the end of the decade, however, these benign assumptions began to erode, posing the issue of whether these strategic judgments were ever fully rooted in either system.

The 1990s: American and Chinese Strategies Redefined

At the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, major domestic and international upheavals disrupted the policy framework governing Sino-American relations. The largely benign assumptions of defense planners in both systems shifted in significant ways, altering prevailing assumptions about the behavior and intentions of both states. These developments were sequential and cumulative, not immediately causal; political factors unrelated to national security also influenced the choices of both leaderships. I will briefly note the most important factors, and then identify some of the implications for security planning.

Domestic developments within China were among the primary triggers of change. The Tiananmen crisis of 1989 abruptly altered expectations of the continued maturation of U.S.-China military to military relations, and American programs for military technology transfer were soon cancelled. Within months of the cessation of American technological assistance, Liu Huaqing, one of China's highest ranking officers who had been educated in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, visited Moscow to initiate discussions on the resumption of Soviet military deliveries to China after a three decade hiatus, a step that would have previously been considered unimaginable. The earliest negotiations (and subsequent agreements) focused on purchase of advanced combat aircraft (the Su-27), whose capabilities vastly surpassed any aircraft in

⁴ See in particular Deng Xiaoping's remarks to an Enlarged Meeting of the Party's Central Military Commission, June 4, 1985, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report-China*, June 12, 1985, pp. K1-2.

China's inventory. The aircraft's range and lethality would for the first time enable China to extend the reach of its air power beyond the mainland. With China prepared to enter into long-term defense collaboration with the Soviet Union, and with Moscow prepared to respond to such needs, the door had opened to the first meaningful enhancement of Chinese military capabilities in decades.

It is unclear whether American planners fully anticipated these developments; no doubt the post-Tiananmen freeze in military to military relations denied the United States vital information about these possibilities. Though the George H.W. Bush Administration sought to preserve as much of the political relationship with Beijing as possible, the value that both leaderships attached to close Sino-American relations had diminished. The administration's decision to approve the sale of 75 F-16 aircraft to Taiwan in the midst of 1992 Presidential election was in part explained by the ample electoral vote count in Texas, where the aircraft were provided, but the initial reports of Su-27 sales to China were also decisive in shifting the center of gravity in U.S. policy debate.⁵ The Bush Administration decided to undertake a large-scale arms sales decision that (absent the larger deterioration in bilateral relations) might not have transpired. It also provoked major reactions from Beijing. With the United States no longer upholding the letter and spirit of the 1982 arms sales communiqué, Chinese leaders crossed thresholds of their own through sales of M-11 missiles to Pakistan and initial planning for the reintroduction of Chinese military capabilities opposite Taiwan.

Two additional factors loomed especially large in U.S. and Chinese security deliberations: the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991; and far-reaching advances in the application of advanced technologies to modern warfare. The collapse of the U.S.S.R. marked the final end of a half century of superpower rivalry; as a consequence, the United States abruptly lacked a global adversary that had enabled it to justify, maintain, and "size" its military forces. The initial post-Soviet defense policy review (undertaken by the U.S. Department of Defense in 1992) devoted preponderant emphasis to the U.S. capability to project military power against a variety of regional threats, which still seemed credible in the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm.⁶ Senior U.S. defense planners therefore characterized security threats from Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the primary "force sizing constructs" in U.S. global strategy.

But there were other straws in the wind. DoD planning papers leaked to the press in early 1992 argued for open-ended American global predominance against any prospective major power adversary, but defined this

⁵ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), pp. 254–273.

⁶ Richard Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, January 1993).

objective in generic terms, without reference to any specific country.⁷ The controversies engendered by these policy documents led to the shelving of this strategy; it would not be until the George W. Bush administration that these ideas again surfaced, and with far greater momentum. A threat-based logic remained the hallmark of U.S. defense planning in the early 1990s, focused predominantly on regional adversaries, thereby preserving America's commitment to global power projection capabilities. U.S. force reductions from the levels of the latter Cold War era still remained relatively modest.

China was not a significant factor in these policy deliberations, quite possibly reflecting its post-Tiananmen retrenchment and its still very tentative advances in military modernization. For example, had DoD been more concerned about the potential enhancement of Chinese military power, the Pentagon would have been far less likely to assent to the closure of U.S. bases in the Philippines in the early 1990s. The renewed surge in China's economy was in its early stages, and was only beginning to garner attention in the United States. Plans for the augmentation of Chinese military forces opposite Taiwan were not well advanced, inasmuch as cross-strait relations had yet to deteriorate sharply. The normalization of Sino-Russian relations also highlighted that China (not unlike the United States) no longer had a central defining threat around which to organize its military forces. Chinese defense planning was beginning to chart a different course, but in the early 1990s internal vulnerabilities and political pressures remained paramount. If Beijing identified a major U.S. threat to China at the time, it was more ideological than military (i.e., America's supposed pursuit of a "peaceful evolution" strategy designed to undermine the Communist Party's hold on power).

But PLA strategists had also begun to focus attention on the profound changes in warfare for which Chinese forces were woefully ill-prepared.⁸ Modern information technologies had begun to transform the battlefield, rendering industrial age military forces ever more vulnerable. Chinese assessments of U.S. military capabilities prior to Operation Desert Storm were well wide of the mark, with many in the PLA anticipating a protracted conflict and significant U.S. combat losses. The stunning successes of American forces triggered an internal reassessment within the Chinese military that continues to the present day. The PLA leadership sought to accelerate acquisition and integration of advanced technologies into Chinese military research and development. These technological needs were also reflected in doctrinal reassessments and important organizational reforms, including continued reductions in the size of the armed forces and increased professionalization

⁷ Relevant portions of the draft Defense Planning Guidance of 1992 are excerpted in the *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.; see also Barton Gellman, "Keeping the U.S. First: Pentagon Would Preclude a Rival Superpower," *Washington Post*, March 11, 1992.

⁸ For an overview of Chinese policy responses to these changes in warfare, consult James C. Mulvenon and Richard H. Yang (eds.), *The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age* (Santa Monica: RAND, CF-145-CAPP/AF, 1999).

of the officer corps. Having long emphasized mass, redundancy, and defense of the homeland, PLA commanders embarked on gestational changes that have achieved far greater fruition over the past decade.⁹

Though the PLA remained a predominantly land-oriented force, national security was for the first time being viewed in a more extended light. An enhanced capacity to assert and protect China's declared national security interests (though still justified by an official defense policy characterized as wholly defensive) would require a much broader spectrum of military capabilities designed to ensure "a favorable peripheral environment," not simply defend the mainland. Indeed, Beijing's modernization efforts appeared largely congruent with the modernization programs underway elsewhere in East Asia, including Japan, South Korea, and (not least) Taiwan. For China, these developments presupposed more advanced air, naval, missile, communications, and intelligence assets, and increased competence and experience in utilizing these capabilities.

With China moving toward a more comprehensive concept of national security, the most pressing threats to Chinese interests were no longer those associated with direct military attack. But some defense planners called attention to how an adversary's military reach and technological advantage could put the mainland's economic and strategic assets at risk and challenge Chinese sovereignty. The PLA's efforts were now focused on the range, lethality, and accuracy of Chinese weapons systems, and preliminary efforts at realizing a modicum of "jointness." Without such advanced capabilities and experience in working with them, senior commanders contended, China could be left in a passive position, unable to protect its vital interests. Senior political leaders found these arguments increasingly persuasive, and as China's rapid economic growth was sustained, the leadership allocated increased funds toward military modernization goals. None of these concerns presumed a decision to employ such power; rather, these were deemed capabilities that China as a modernizing state could not do without. Having long been subordinate in the resource allocation decisions of the reform era, the PLA had begun to develop a more compelling rationale and logic for longer-term military development that civilian leaders were prepared to support.

Absent a specific threat, however, these efforts lacked urgency, direction, and momentum. The sharp deterioration in cross-strait relations occasioned by Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States in 1995 provided all three.¹⁰ The PLA's exercises opposite Taiwan in 1995 and 1996 furnished the proximate opportunity to display China's nascent military capabilities. Leaders in Beijing were intent on demonstrating that the PLA

⁹ Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today—Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰ Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen—The Politics of U.S.-China Relations 1989–2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. 243–263.

was prepared (at least in a provisional sense) to exercise its increased combat power. The testing of unarmed short-range ballistic missiles launched from locations in Fujian Province (the first military batteries had been introduced to Fujian during 1994) provoked major military responses by the United States. Washington's deployment of two carrier battle groups east of Taiwan did not prefigure an imminent major crisis. However, it signaled then (and since) that the United States had recalibrated its security assumptions in relation to China, with a prospective Taiwan contingency again introduced into American defense planning.

The events of 1995-96 thus set in train longer-term effects in the defense bureaucracies of both states that reverberate to the present day. For Chinese planners, it validated the belief that the United States was still prepared to interject its military power into an issue of defining importance to Chinese interests. China therefore had to plan for two classes of scenarios involving Taiwan: those where American power was a major factor and those where it was not. This reassessment did not make the United States an avowed Chinese adversary, but it hugely sobered leaders in both states about the risks and potential consequences of a renewed crisis. U.S.-Chinese leadership interactions in President Bill Clinton's second term in office therefore devoted ample political efforts to stabilizing bilateral relations. But the events of 1995 and 1996 set in motion longer-term changes in defense planning that are far more fully materialized today, with particular attention to China's building of "anti-access" capabilities directed against forward-deployed American maritime power.¹¹ The PLA did not obscure the perceived necessity to build such capabilities, nor does it do so today.

Although Beijing had never precluded non-peaceful means to achieve unification, for most of China's post-1949 history the use of force against Taiwan (as distinct from actions undertaken against various offshore islands) was a ritualized slogan, devoid of operational significance. In the aftermath of 1995-96, the prospective use of force, even if characterized as an option of last resort, had achieved greatly increased prominence in Chinese policy deliberations. The scope and scale of Chinese exercises opposite Taiwan increased measurably, and there was a surge in the enhancement of short range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) at coastal locations that has been sustained for a full decade. (According to late 2006 estimate from the Defense Intelligence Agency, the total number of SRBMs deployed opposite Taiwan numbers approximately 900; recent estimates from officials on Taiwan are closer to 1,000. OSD also reports that land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) designed for precision strike

¹¹James C. Mulvenon et al., *Chinese Responses to U.S. Military Transformation and Implications for the Department of Defense* (Santa Monica: RAND, MG-340-OSD, 2006); *Annual Report to the Congress-Military Power of the People's Republic of China-2007* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2007), pp. 15-18.

against hard targets are also in development.¹²) Air, naval, and air defense acquisitions from Russia also grew both quantitatively and qualitatively, with the “Taiwan scenario” the defining rationale for Chinese military modernization.

The PLA asserted that its enhanced capabilities could advance a wide spectrum of objectives, including political deterrence, the demonstration of resolve in crisis and non-crisis, the forestalling of additional moves toward Taiwanese independence, and (not least) the use of force against Taiwan, should Beijing conclude that it had no other means to prevent the island’s permanent political separation from the mainland. But the parallel need to plan against the possibility of third party intervention (and the capabilities deemed necessary to deny an external force the ability to intervene, either directly or indirectly) was fraught with far larger risks and consequences, and with ample potential for misperception and miscalculation. There were no operational precedents in China’s post-1949 history for the large-scale employment of military force in and across the Taiwan Strait, and Chinese military forces had not engaged in significant armed conflict since the border war against Vietnam in 1979. Political leaders in Washington and Beijing were intent on defusing the possibility of renewed crisis, but military policy makers were simultaneously given increased latitude to plan for Taiwan contingencies. With the heightened attention to the potential for a major crisis in the Taiwan Strait, a major threshold had been breached, thereby reshaping the contours of military power and policy in both systems, but especially in China. To more fully elucidate these possibilities, we need to turn to how China and the United States are conceptualizing their respective defense objectives in the early 21st century, and weigh the potential consequences for future bilateral relations.

China and America: Planning for the Longer-Term

At the start of the George W. Bush Administration, the outlook for Sino-American relations seemed highly problematic, with senior U.S. officials determined to revisit U.S. the policies of the Clinton Administration, including military to military relations with Beijing and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Though the worst fears of a sharp deterioration in relations did not materialize, major uncertainties and potential divergence persist in national security interactions between Washington and Beijing. Indeed, some analysts argue that September 11 constituted only a momentary hiatus in what is destined to emerge as the defining interstate rivalry of the 21st century.¹³ Longer-term wariness and suspicion within both systems about the “strategic intentions” of the other is now a commonplace feature in policy debate and in the comments of senior officials on both sides.

¹² Ibid., p. 17.

¹³ Jonathan D. Pollack (ed.), *Strategic Surprise? U.S.-China Relations in the Early 21st Century* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2004).

Chinese policy makers nevertheless remain largely focused on a “lower volume” strategy toward the United States, contesting major differences with Washington, but with a minimum of the stridency that once routinely characterized Chinese policy statements. The 2007 ASAT test constitutes a rare episode of demonstrating advanced military capabilities designed to caution and thereby deter the United States from courses of action in space deemed overtly inimical to Chinese security interests. But American policy makers view the ASAT test in far more worrisome terms.¹⁴ A less overtly contentious relationship with Washington preserves the ability of both capitals to collaborate where necessary and feasible, without in any way inhibiting Beijing’s pursuit of autonomous power goals, including a noticeable acceleration of its military development since the late 1990s. The essential paradox of contemporary Sino-American relations is the unprecedented expansion of bilateral ties, simultaneous with the development of military policies, programs, and activities that could skew future ties in much more adversarial directions. Defense planning (though subject to political direction in both countries) often assumes a life of its own.

As major powers, China and the United States have also undertaken heightened efforts to justify and legitimate their national defense strategies, hoping to gain broader international support of declared policy goals while building and maintaining domestic support for national defense expenditure.¹⁵ But this is predominantly the presentational side of military planning. It affords at best partial insight into the long-term factors that will shape the strategies, forces, and future conduct of both nations’ military forces. Moreover, the seeming parallelism in such policy documents obscures the profound differences in the strategic circumstances and political and bureaucratic processes of the two countries. As an emergent power whose military modernization has accelerated significantly in recent years, China has sought to reassure others of its larger domestic preoccupations, while also asserting that its military development is appropriate for its growing economic and political prominence. This has obligated China to increased disclosure about the purposes and dimensions of its military development.

China has released five biannual Defense White Papers since 1998. The newest version, released in December 2006, reiterates a set of generic national security concerns that call primary attention to the longer-term requirements of Chinese security. These include: (1) the prevention of national separation and the promotion of reunification; (2) the defense of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and maritime rights and interests; (3) the coordinated

¹⁴ For an explicit and forceful presentation by a leading Chinese defense strategist, see Bao Shixiu, “Deterrence Revisited: Outer Space,” *China Security*, Winter 2007, pp. 2–11.

¹⁵ For relevant examples, see *Report of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, February 6, 2006, available at www.defenselink.mil/pdfs/QDR20060203.pdf; and *China’s National Defense in 2006* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, December 29, 2006).

development of economic development and overall capabilities; and (4) defense modernization in accord with China's domestic conditions and the enhancement of operational self-defense capabilities appropriate to the information era. These goals are sufficiently elastic that they can incorporate and justify a very wide range of modernization programs.

Beijing's latest White Paper (though offering important indications of modernization priorities) failed to mollify those seeking a fuller rendering of goals, programs, and capabilities. But the document contained ample confirmation that the PLA aspires to a more technology-intensive force appropriate to 21st century strategic realities, premised on the increased "informationalization" of warfare. It posits the need for major enhancements in "firepower, assault, mobility, protection, and information," all premised on "major breakthroughs" in joint operations and inter-service integration. In the ground forces, these will be geared toward "trans-regional mobility . . . air-ground integrated operations, long-distance maneuvers, rapid assaults, and special operations." The PLA Navy will emphasize "gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defensive operations . . . and capabilities in integrated maritime operations and nuclear counterattacks." The PLA Air Force will undertake a "transition from territorial air defense to both offensive and defensive operations," including "air strike, air and missile defense, early warning and reconnaissance and strategic projection." The Second Artillery (i.e., the missile forces) will emphasize enhanced "capabilities in strategic deterrence and conventional strike," with Chinese nuclear doctrine premised on "a self-defensive nuclear strategy . . . and counter-attack in self-defense." At the same time, the White Paper acknowledged average annual increases in military expenditure between 1990 and 2005 (after allowing for increases in the consumer price index) of 9.64 per cent, still well below prevailing external estimates but far more congruent with the heightened priority of defense modernization.¹⁶

The U.S. Defense Department's latest assessment of China's military power, released in early 2007. The 2005 and 2006 DoD reports in particular take explicit issue with more relaxed characterizations of Chinese modernization goals. Both the 2005 and 2006 DoD reports offer far more worrisome assessments of Chinese plans and intentions, calling particular concern to the scale and breadth of various weapons development programs across the full spectrum of military operations, including what the reports deem a major investment in power-projection capabilities. In DoD's view, Chinese investment strategies portend "a force capable of prosecuting a range of military operations in Asia-well beyond Taiwan." Though the 2007 assessment adopted a more measured tone than the documents of the two preceding years, it identified a broadening range of Chinese capabilities that could purportedly be utilized in various "non-Taiwan contingencies" involving

¹⁶ Ibid.

neighboring states.¹⁷ These programs portend capabilities that “go beyond a Taiwan scenario” and “put regional balances at risk . . . potentially posing a credible threat to modern militaries operating in the region.” DoD also faults China for a highly constricted approach to military transparency, including a supposed reliance on strategic deception, a penchant for extreme secrecy, a significant understatement of the budgetary resources allocated to national defense, and obscurity on how the PLA might employ force in a future crisis.

However, the Pentagon also acknowledges that Chinese programs and strategies are designed to counter major U.S. advances in information dominance and deep strike capabilities-i.e., the precise assets that the PLA would need to impede or undermine in a major crisis related to Taiwan, which DoD continues to characterize as the predominant focus of China’s modernization programs. By implication, if not by explicit admission, the Pentagon report concedes that modernization activities undertaken by China cannot be understood apart from the capabilities that the PLA believes it could well confront. Thus, military planning (though a “stand alone” activity undertaken by both the United States and China) assumes primary meaning in relation to perceptions of the capabilities and future behavior of potential adversaries. In this regard, does China have any more assurance about future U.S. behavior and intentions than the United States has about China’s? Under such circumstances, does either state have particular incentives for full information disclosure, even assuming that either could fully specify the scope and scale of longer-range military requirements and strategic intentions? Would not these judgments derive in significant measure from the environment that China believes it could confront?

In this respect, DoD to a certain extent is hoist on its own petard. Since the onset of the Bush Administration, senior defense officials have routinely asserted that the U.S. no longer subscribes to “threat-based planning,” opting instead for what it has described as “capability-based planning” that identifies how U.S. forces could be placed at risk, but does not identify the source of that threat. With the conspicuous exception of counteracting potential terrorist activities and an array of threats emanating from instability in the Islamic world, this claim seems suspect. The inherent character of contingency planning mandates that the specific circumstances (i.e., locale, forces, etc.) be the primary shapers of force requirements. Moreover, various characterizations in the Quadrennial Defense Reviews of 2001 and 2006 leave little to the imagination. In the 2001 document, DoD noted the prospect of a prospective threat in Asia from “a military competitor with a formidable resource base” that was China in all but name.¹⁸ In the 2006 document, China is

¹⁷ *Annual Report to the Congress-Military Power of the People’s Republic of China-2007*, pp. 22–23.

¹⁸ *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, September 30, 2001), p. 4.

identified explicitly as the state with “the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and could over time field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages.¹⁹” The report further highlights the goal of “shaping the choices of countries at strategic crossroads . . . [while] creat[ing] prudent hedges against the possibility that cooperative approaches by themselves may fail to preclude future conflict.” Putting aside the question of what major power (including the United States) is *not* at a “strategic crossroads,” the DoD report draws attention to three states: China, India, and Russia. But the characterization of China’s current capabilities and longer-term power potential is qualitatively different in emphasis and implication.

Beijing also seems to subscribe (at least for representational purposes) to a concept akin to capability-based planning. For both states, there is a somewhat contrived quality to capability-based justifications of defense strategy. In the Taiwan case, however, Chinese military planners recognize that specific contingencies are largely driving modernization plans and acquisition priorities. But prominent Chinese strategic analysts also acknowledge that China’s defense modernization has assumed increased pride of place in national priorities; there is now “coordinated development of economic construction and national defense and army building.” This new circumstance –i.e., the need for Beijing “to build a powerful military force matching its international status”- requires a more compelling justification of the purposes underlying China’s future political and security roles. Without such a rationale, some strategic observers note, China could trigger heightened wariness on the part of established powers, or even “serious conflict and confrontation,” thereby directly undermining the larger “strategic opportunity” of advancing China’s development goals by keeping free from embroilment in crisis or armed conflict.²⁰ This is compelling China’s military leadership to articulate a more compelling and candid justification of its future force requirements.

Refreshingly, Chinese strategists are not speaking with one voice on these issues. Alternative possibilities loom as China contemplates the next stage of its military development, with pronounced distinctions between interest-driven definition of future military needs (much of this geared to China’s economic and energy interests), as distinct from forces explicitly required for potential armed conflicts. Some leaders hope to evolve a rationale that is not threat-driven, and would enable China to avoid a longer-term confrontation with U.S. power. The development of more autonomous capabilities that moves China (literally and figuratively) into uncharted waters

¹⁹ *Report of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, p. 29.

²⁰ The above quotations are drawn from Yang Yi, “Adhere to Peaceful Development, Safeguard the Period of Strategic Opportunity,” *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, September 20, 2006, pp. 40–42. Rear Admiral Yang is Director of the Institute of Strategic Studies, National Defense University.

looms as an ever more realistic prospect, with prominent voices (including the leadership of the PLA Navy) vigorously urging heightened attention to Chinese maritime development.²¹ Yet others voice concern that China's reach could exceed its grasp, or that Beijing's growing attention to maritime power could distract the nation from more its enduring economic and security concerns as a land power.²² Ye is a Professor in the School of International Studies at Peking University. Additional prospective paths could entail far broader Chinese involvement in disaster relief, humanitarian operations, and peace keeping as part of a larger Chinese "stakeholder" role in the global system. Others urge collaborative maritime security arrangements to guard against the disruption of global commerce or any impediments to the safe movement of energy resources. Without question, the debate over China's longer-term strategic horizons has been joined.

All these prospects will unfold in the context of the future Sino-American relationship. We therefore return full circle. Characterizations of potential threat derive in significant measure from perceptions and strategic judgment. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review and the 2006 National Security Strategy state that the United States hopes that China will emerge as a "responsible stakeholder," while the U.S. simultaneously "hedge[s] against other possibilities."²³ Such dualism may well be inherent in long-term U.S. strategy toward China, but by so declaring hasn't the question of identifying a threat been asked and answered? What policy responses does the United States expect to elicit from China in return? Configurations of long-term strategy are very much a two-way street. Where and how might Washington and Beijing meet on this street?

The longer-term capabilities, strategic orientations, and mutual perceptions of the United States and China therefore underlie all these questions. The larger implications of China as an arrived power have yet to be fully evaluated. Does Beijing deem U.S. military power in the West Pacific an inherent threat to Chinese interests? Does Washington deem China's continued military enhancement an inherent threat to U.S. interests? If not, what does the United States deem an appropriate level of capability, involvement, and responsibility for China as a reemerged major power in the Asia-Pacific region? Is there an underlying basis for Washington and Beijing to serve as simultaneous "responsible stakeholders," even as both pursue autonomous capabilities and national strategies? Or do both states (and their respective military bureaucracies) retreat into self-protective stances that leave both powers and

²¹ See in particular Wu Shengli and Hu Yanlin, "Building a Powerful People's Navy That Meets the Requirements of the Historical Mission for Our Army," *Qiusbi*, July 16, 2007. Admirals Wu and Lin are respectively the Commander and Political Commissar of the PLA Navy.

²² For one such provocative statement, see Ye Zicheng, "Geopolitics From A Greater Historical Perspective," *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, June 20, 2007.

²³ *Report of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, p. 28; *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2006), pp. 41–42.

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the region less secure? Absent the serious, sustained attention of civilian and military leaders on both sides of the Pacific, the long-term viability of a reconfigured regional security order seems far from assured. A long-term policy agenda confronts the United States and China. It remains for both to grasp it fully.

