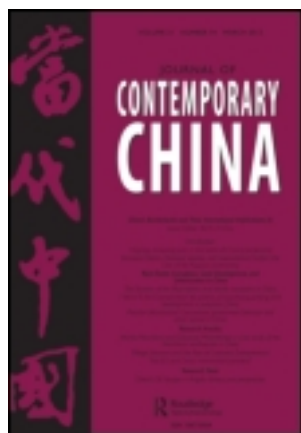


This article was downloaded by: [Rollins College]

On: 09 May 2014, At: 08:20

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Contemporary China

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjcc20>

An Emerging Consensus on the US Threat: the United States according to PLA officers

Yawei Liu & Justine Zheng Ren

Published online: 19 Nov 2013.

To cite this article: Yawei Liu & Justine Zheng Ren (2014) An Emerging Consensus on the US Threat: the United States according to PLA officers, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 23:86, 255-274, DOI: [10.1080/10670564.2013.832527](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.832527)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.832527>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

An Emerging Consensus on the US Threat: the United States according to PLA officers

YAWEI LIU* and JUSTINE ZHENG REN

Though the PLA elite perceptions of the United States have fluctuated over time, there has been some regularity in the evolution of their perceptions. Comparing the dominant perceptions of the United States among different generations of Chinese military elites in the PRC, we find that the PLA elite perceptions of US intentions have been foremost influenced by China's strategic interest in a certain period, rather than the level and intensity of bilateral exchanges at the time. Using the case of US arms sales to Taiwan and the case of the South China Sea and the Diaoyu Islands, we try to assess how consistent and persistent PLA elite perceptions of the US have been in recent years. While we agree that these outspoken military men cannot be taken on the surface as indicative of China's national policies, we will also point out several important dimensions that are likely to allow the PLA to play a more influential role in setting the agenda for China's strategic interest in the era of Xi Jinping.

China's top civilian leadership, when talking about Sino–US relations in the era of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, always seems to be consolatory, emphasizing the importance and mutual benefits of the bilateral relations. While they do not like certain aspects of US policies, such as selling arms to Taiwan, even their repudiation of Washington is always couched in very dry and non-inflammatory language. The approach taken by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of lashing out at the United States, however, is vivid and vehement. In the first four years since President Obama came into office in 2009, Washington and Beijing have been trying to manage their volatile bilateral relations, but the rhetorical interventions by these PLA officers have made it hard for the Chinese leadership to present a coherent and cohesive policy towards the United States.¹

* Yawei Liu is the Director of the China Program at The Carter Center. He can be reached by email at yawei.liu@emory.edu. Justine Zheng Ren is a political scientist and strategist. She can be reached by email at justine.zr@gmail.com

1. For more details on this aspect, see Michael S. Chase, 'Fear and loathing in Beijing? Chinese suspicion of US intentions', *China Brief* 11(18), (30 September 2011); Michael Yahuda, 'China's new assertiveness in the South China Sea', *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(81), (2013), pp. 446–459.

At the beginning of Xi Jinping's era, one of the first things this new secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) did was to impose tighter control of the PLA and build his personal network of protégés in the military. On 23 November 2012, just eight days after he became chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Xi presided over a ceremony to add a third star to General Wei Fenghe, the new commander-in-chief of China's Second Artillery. All such ceremonies in the past were held in June or July of the year regardless of when a general was eligible. Xi's decision to convene this ceremony at this time appears to be a symbolic gesture. During his tour of Guangdong in December 2012, Xi inspected military units there and called upon the PLA to be prepared for wars.² In fact, since the Bo Xilai scandal and the assumption of power by Xi Jinping, a critical moment when new leadership needs to consolidate power, the Chinese military has been actively called upon to curtail internal corruption and prepare for war over the rising tensions of the East China Sea and the South China Sea. *The PLA Daily* has also published editorials calling for absolute CCP control of the military. All these attempts to have tighter control over the military reflect the fact that, to the top leadership of the CCP, the PLA is not a uniformed and subordinate organization that unconditionally complies with the will of the leadership. Instead, the top leadership needs to use all available resources to keep the military in check. Against this backdrop, we see it as an interesting and beneficial exercise to explore the changing perceptions of the US among the PLA elite and to examine their influence on the evolving relationship between China and the United States at the beginning of the Xi Jinping era, through their perceptions, statements and strategic ambitions towards the US.

Conventional research on the PLA relies on internal materials and articles from academic journals. The problem of this approach is that it lacks transparency and has a very limited readership. We find that the huge amount of information in the mass media, which has long been neglected, is a gold mine for the study. This is an original and fascinating approach in studying the 'black box' of the PLA. We acknowledge that information gathered from such sources may be skewed, but it is exactly the skewedness of this information that has the potential to affect the perceptions and choices of policy makers.³ In empirical research, Justine Zheng Ren has used this method to study the channels through which the views of PLA officers are aired to the public and explored why the appearance of such unusual statements by PLA officers has become possible in the tightly controlled media system of authoritarian China.⁴ Michael Yahuda also points out in his recent article that the statements by PLA officers have hardened China's position on the territorial disputes.⁵ This article will further test the effectiveness of this new method of mass media, utilizing the same approach to analyze what role the PLA may play during Xi's era on managing Sino-

2. See *People's Daily*, (24 November 2012); and 'Jundui jiu yao zhunbei dazhang' ['The army should prepare for war'], *Fenghuang Weishi* [*Phoenix Satellite TV*], (19 December 2012), available at: http://phtv.ifeng.com/program/jqgcs/detail_2012_12/21/20399194_0.shtml.

3. Susan Shirk, 'Changing media, changing foreign policy in China', *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 8(1), (2007), p. 60.

4. Justine Zheng Ren, 'China's outspoken PLA officers in the mass media', unpublished paper.

5. Yahuda, 'China's new assertiveness in the South China Sea'.

US relations and security issues in the Asia–Pacific. Through these empirical studies, we hope to establish a new way to better understand the strategic thoughts and ambitions of the Chinese military.

Let us first have a brief sampling of the PLA’s articulated perceptions of the US during the late years of Hu Jintao’s reign. In August 2009, Lieutenant General Li Jijun, who fought in the Korean War, later rose to command the 38th Field Army and retired from the PLA as Deputy President of the Academy of Military Science, wrote an article for the *China Defense Daily*: ‘There is hegemony behind human rights and there are weapons behind hegemony’. He says that in the foreseeable years to come, the United States will continue to possess advantages in both hard power and soft power and expand its military via both hard and soft measures. Thus China should work hard to defend her sovereignty, security and developmental interests. He declares that American arrogance and bullying behavior against China is highlighted by the search of the *Yinhe*, the bombing of the Chinese Embassy, the EP-3 incident, arms sale to Taiwan and the instigation of riots in Tibet.⁶ In early 2009, Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu of the National Defense University published a book entitled *The China Dream*, a huge bestseller in China. According to Liu Mingfu, the American era is receding and the China century is dawning. Throughout the century, all that happens in the world comes down to Sino–US rivalry. The ultimate goal for China is to uproot the United States as a hegemonic power and create a brave new world without any hegemony.⁷ In a 2010 article entitled ‘Can the US slow down the rise of China?’ in the *People’s Daily*, Han Xudong, another uniformed professor at the National Defense University, declares that in order to contain the rise of China, the United States has come up with a grand strategy made up of careful ‘grasp’ and calculated ‘guidance’. Americans do not want to see the rise of China undermine its own supremacy. Therefore, the United States needs to have a full ‘grasp’ of Chinese intentions and seek to stall China’s development through delaying measures so that it does not deviate into full hostility against the United States.⁸

These military officers are not only very sensitive to the US strategic intentions, but also bluntly warn other countries in the Asia–Pacific rim not to get too close to Washington. On 25 August 2012, the *Global Times*, a tabloid newspaper affiliated with the *People’s Daily*, invited ten active and retired military analysts and asked them to comment on the rising tensions with neighboring countries over territorial disputes. Colonel Dai Xu, an air force officer currently affiliated with the National Defense University, threatened:

Since we have decided that the United States is bluffing in the East China Sea, we should take this opportunity to respond to these empty provocations with something real ... This includes Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan, who are the three running dogs of the

6. Li Jijun, ‘Renquan beihou shi baquan, baquan beihou shi wuqi’ [‘There is hegemony behind human rights and there are weapons behind hegemony’], *Zhongguo Guofangbao* [*The China Defense Daily*], (18 August 2009).

7. Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo Meng* [*The China Dream*] (Beijing: Zhongguo Youyi Chuban Gongsi [China Friendship Publishing Company], 2010), p. 116. For the impact of Liu Mingfu, see Suisheng Zhao, ‘Foreign policy implications of Chinese nationalism revisited: the strident turn’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(82), (2013), pp. 535–553.

8. Han Xudong, ‘Meiguo ezhi zhongguo jueqi liuda shouduan, shinian hou tanpai’ [‘Six large measures by the US to stop the rise of China, showdown in ten years’], *The People’s Daily*, (12 October 2010).

United States in the Asia Pacific region. We only need to kill one, and it will immediately bring the others to heel.⁹

On the last day of October 2012, at an international defense conference organized by Australian Army Chief David Morrison, Lieutenant General Ren Haiquan, Deputy President of the Academy of Military Science, warned Australia not to cooperate with Japan, a once 'fascist' state that used to bomb Darwin, and blamed America's 'pivot to Asia' and the stationed Marines in Australia for complicating the evolving security relationships in Asia.¹⁰ Interestingly, the coverage of the same event by Xinhua, China's government news agency, only focuses on General Ren's call for mutual understanding and emphasis on increasing trade among Asian states as a way to avoid confrontation.¹¹

This brief sampling of the PLA elite perceptions of the United States in the late years of Hu Jintao is dreadful and begs quite a few questions. Does the PLA elite always look at the United States in the same way? Have these perceptions changed over time? What are their strategic thoughts and ambitions conveyed in the articulated perceptions? In this article, we will first trace and compare the dominant perceptions of the United States among different generations of Chinese military elites in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). We find that, though the PLA elite perceptions have fluctuated over time, there have been some regularities in the evolution of their perceptions. While the PLA elite has hardly perceived the US as a security provider or a friendly hegemon in the world, their evaluation of the US intentions has been foremost influenced by China's strategic interest in a certain period, rather than the level and intensity of bilateral exchanges at the time. Then we will focus on the recent period, when a quick consolidation of the consensus of the US threat is taking place among China's military elite. Using two cases of the PLA reactions to international crises, we try to evaluate how consistent and persistent the PLA elite perceptions of the US have been. While we agree that these outspoken military men cannot be taken on the surface as indicative of the national policies of China, we will finally point out several important dimensions that are likely to allow the PLA to play a more influential role in setting the agenda for China's strategic interest in the era of Xi Jinping.

According to our survey, the PLA perceptions of the United States can be divided into four periods. In the first period (1945–1968), the United States is portrayed as a 'paper tiger'. The Chinese civil war and the Korean War had brought down the amiable relationship between the Chinese military and the United States and had forever colored the PLA perceptions of the United States. Under the heavy influence of Mao Zedong, the PLA saw that the United States was an interventionist aggressor, and that its evil ambition could be contained only if one dared to confront it even with far more inferior weapons. This peculiar view of the United States served as a

9. Dai Xu, 'Yuefeiri shi meiguó santiaó yatai zougou' ['Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan are the three running dogs of the United States in the Asia Pacific region'], *Global Times*, (25 August 2012), available at: <http://blog.huanqiu.com/44055/2012-08-25/2591142>.

10. Brendan Nicholson, 'Chinese top brass bags US influence in region', *The Australian*, (31 October 2012).

11. Wu Xiaoxiao, 'Chinese military expert discusses China's concept of security in Asia-Pacific', *Xinhua*, (30 October 2012), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/2012-10/30/c_113545276.htm.

confidence booster to the young republic. The second period is the ‘lesser of the two evils’ period (1969–1988). In ideological terms, Washington was still evil but Beijing began to adjust its strategic posture towards the US on pragmatic grounds. Though Mao was the initiator of this strategic reorientation, PLA generals also played a role in designing and recommending the transformation of the PRC’s foreign policy strategy. The third period (1989–2000s) saw ‘the departing of the partner’ and the deterioration of bilateral cooperation. The Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 was a watershed moment in Sino–US relations and the PLA turned sharply against the US due to immediate sanctions and subsequent incidents of humiliation. However, Deng Xiaoping’s ‘lying low’ approach, China’s growing economic ties with the US and Americans’ rapid crushing of Iraq in the first and second Gulf Wars succeeded in preventing the PLA from openly airing their grievances against Washington. It is difficult to assign the beginning of the fourth period but it is roughly around the early 2000s, when an emerging consensus of the American threat was consolidated and openly articulated by the military elite. Unlike previous resentment towards the US, the military officers at this time have become discontent with empty words, and are willing to denounce Washington publicly and link the US threat closely to China’s strategic interests. This new orientation in the Chinese army will be a remarkable feature in the coming years when Xi Jinping will try to manage this most important bilateral relationship.

The United States as a ‘paper tiger’: 1945–1968

In the years leading to the end of World War II, the CCP and its military apparatus had its first encounters with the Americans. The flying tigers and members of the Dixie Mission in Yan’an all left a very positive impression on their Chinese counterparts. After the war was over, the CCP leadership, most of whom had military backgrounds, was quite upset by President Truman’s General Order Number One, an executive order that effectively rendered it illegal for the CCP to accept Japanese surrender anywhere in China. Considering the imbalance of power between the CCP and the Nationalist Party (KMT), Mao Zedong and his comrades shelved their bitterness to enter into negotiations with the KMT force, with General George Marshall acting as the mediator. The subsequent ceasefire agreement was violated shortly after it was signed, and the CCP and the KMT were at war. The United States did not intervene directly in the Chinese civil war but offered moral and material support to the KMT. This angered the CCP.¹²

In August 1946, an American reporter, Anna Louise Strong, visited Mao in Yan’an. During the conversation, Mao singled out the United States as the main perpetrator of the Chinese civil war and told Strong that ‘if the American people stay the hands of the American reactionaries who are helping Chiang Kai-shek fight the civil war, there is hope for peace’. When Strong asked what would happen if the United States decided to use atomic bombs against the Soviet Union and China, Mao plunged into a long

12. For more information on this episode, see Yawei Liu, *The United States according to Mao Zedong, Chinese–American Relations, 1893–1976*, Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1996.

tirade against Washington, and the language he used later became the staple of PLA disgust and resentment against the United States. According to Mao:

The atom bomb is a paper tiger which the US reactionaries use to scare people. It looks terrible, but in fact it isn't. Of course, the atom bomb is a weapon of mass slaughter, but the outcome of a war is decided by the people, not by one or two new types of weapon. Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters, the US reactionaries, are all paper tigers too ... Chinese reactionaries are using the 'strength' of the United States to frighten the Chinese people. But it will be proved that the US reactionaries, like all the reactionaries in history, do not have much strength ... Although the Chinese people still face many difficulties and will long suffer hardships from the joint attacks of US imperialism and the Chinese reactionaries, the day will come when these reactionaries are defeated and we are victorious. The reason is simply this: the reactionaries represent reaction, we represent progress.¹³

Mao's view of the United States colored the view of PLA soldiers and officers as he had gained the status of CCP savior. When the PLA crossed the Yangzi River in April 1949 and the KMT began to withdraw to the South. Mao was hopeful that the American leadership would lose hope in Chiang Kai-shek and recognize his government instead. Washington first decided not to authorize Ambassador Leighton Stuart to Beijing to meet up with Mao and further made the decision not to extend recognition, 'waiting for the dust to settle'. In frustration, Mao wrote a series of articles castigating US aggression against the Chinese nation and laid a solid foundation for China's growing anti-American sentiment.¹⁴ The outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950 shattered any hope of reconciliation between Washington and Beijing.

The war did not end until July 1953. As a result, a whole generation of the PLA was to harbor two strong views: the United States was an interventionist aggressor; and its evil ambition could be contained only if one dared to confront it, even with far more inferior weapons. In an article written on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of China's intervention in Korea, Lieutenant General Li Jijun, who joined the battles in North Korea in 1951, insisted that China would have suffered unimaginable consequences if it had not crossed the Yalu River to Kim Il-song's rescue. According to him, the war produced a respectable nation and a proud army because a young nation that had just emerged from its own civil war managed to fight the most powerful nation in the world to a standstill.¹⁵ However, the war had also eliminated the possibility of a Washington–Beijing rapprochement, and the mutual hostility lasted many years until China's ideological brawl with Moscow almost triggered a war between the two communist giants.

13. 'Talk with American correspondent Anna Louise Strong', (August 1946), *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, available at: http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_13.htm.

14. These articles include Mao Zedong, 'Cast away illusions, prepare for struggle', (14 August 1949); Mao Zedong, 'Farewell, Leighton Stuart!', (18 August 1949); Mao Zedong, 'Why it is necessary to discuss the White Paper', (28 August 1949); and Mao Zedong, 'Friendship or aggression?', (30 August 1949).

15. Li Jijun, 'Mao Zedong de junshi zhanlue siwei' ['The military strategic thinking of Mao Zedong'], *Bainianchao* [*Hundred Year Tide*], (October 2003).

The lesser of the two evils: 1969–1988

From the 1950s to the late 1960s, the United States was perceived to be a bully and a decadent power bent on aggression overseas until the relationship between Moscow and Beijing turned openly sour. The turning point came in 1969 when Mao ordered the Chinese forces to engage the Soviet troops on the border in Heilongjiang. Moscow reacted strongly. China was suddenly confronted with the possibility of facing two hostile superpowers. Of the two, Moscow was the one willing to attack China with nuclear weapons.¹⁶ In late spring of 1969, Mao assigned four of the PLA's ten marshals to study the current international situation and make policy recommendations to him. These four marshals were Ye Jianying, elected member of the Central Committee of the CCP's 9th Congress; Chen Yi, China's Foreign Minister up to 1966; Xu Xiangqian, formerly in charge of China's nuclear bomb and missile programs; and Nie Rongzhen, formerly the PLA's Chief of Staff. Mao also urged them not to be bound by the accusations against US imperialism stated in the political report of the 9th Congress.¹⁷

On 11 July 1969, the four marshals concluded that an American attack on China was not likely for the following reasons: (1) the Pacific separated China and the United States. The US involvement in Korea and Vietnam made it even more unlikely that the United States would attack China; (2) the strategic focus of the United States was on the West. It would never fight a war with China so that the Soviet Union would benefit from it; and (3) the United States would very much like Japan to be its anti-China proxy, but Japan only wanted to be in the leadership position in Asia and get back its lost territories. Tokyo was in no mood to attack China. Therefore the Soviet Union was identified as the more dangerous enemy and that it was more likely to attack China.¹⁸ Furthermore, Marshall Ye Jianying and Marshall Chen Yi proposed that China could play the US card to deter potential Soviet attack against China.¹⁹ Although existing evidences were insufficient to prove the influence of their proposal on Mao's following strategic adjustment towards the US,²⁰ the military men's assessment of the US shows that there was a gradual and instrumental realization among the PLA elite that the United States might not harbor such a dire hostility against China and could be 'befriended'. In their view, Washington was simply the lesser of the two evils.

While Mao was undoubtedly the engine of the Sino-US rapprochement in the following few years, the PLA leaders clearly reached the same conclusion through their own analysis and judgment. According to the recollections of Xiong Xianghui, the four marshals had discussed how to make use of the US-USSR conflict to open

16. John Lewis and Litai Xue, 'Sulian he xiji jihua taisi fuzhong' ['The aborted Soviet nuclear attack against China'], *Leadership [Lingdao]*, (September 2010; October 2010).

17. Xiong Xianghui, 'Dakai Zhongmei guanxi de qianzou' ['The prelude to open Sino-US relations'], *Zhonggong Dangshi Ziliao [CCP History Documents]* no. 42, (Beijing, 1992), pp. 60–61.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 69–75. We have no record of how Mao responded to this report, but his action seemed to confirm that he had adopted its recommendations in their entirety.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

20. Niu Jun, '1969 nian zhongsu bianjie chongtu yu zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng' ['The 1969 Sino-USSR border conflict and China's foreign policy adjustment'], *Dangdai Zhongguo Yanjiu [Study of Contemporary China]* no. 1, (1999).

Sino–US relations in August and September 1969, but they didn't formulate a formal proposal on this and decided to report orally to Premier Zhou Enlai on their recommendations for Sino–US relations. The excessive caution they took was not irrational, because they were unclear of Mao's views about Sino–US relations and would have to face unfavorable political consequences if their recommendations irritated Mao.²¹ On the other hand, once Mao made his decision to improve Sino–US relations, he certainly needed support from the PLA to initiate a thaw with Washington. After all, the entire military was indoctrinated to hate America at that time, though the military elite was conscious of what was ideological propaganda and what was core national interest.

Departing of the partner: 1989–2000s

Mao died in 1976 before the official normalization of Sino–US relations. Through a brief period of political infighting, Deng Xiaoping came to have a firm grasp on power. Deng was an ultimate military person. His decision to shelve concerns regarding arms sales to Taiwan in order to proceed with Sino–US normalization revealed an extraordinary sense of pragmatism and a more sober perception of the American intention regarding Taiwan. However, this does not mean Deng had a friendlier view of the United States.²² In 1981, at a Politburo meeting, Deng reminded his fellow leaders that China should prepare for the worst in its dealings with the United States. In his meeting with Kim Il-sung in September 1983, Deng criticized the Americans for imposing hegemony and deploying four aircraft carriers around China.²³

Despite these concerns, Sino–US relations remained fairly productive and mutually beneficial. However, the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre shattered the decade-long harmony and both sides failed to establish mutual trust and common goals afterwards. In early July 1989, President George Bush sent his secret envoy General Brent Scowcroft to Beijing to meet Deng. Deng put the blame squarely on Washington for the drastic deterioration of Sino–US relations. He warned that China would not tolerate any foreign interference in domestic affairs at all costs.²⁴ The role of the PLA in the massacre had tarnished its image and had caused all military-to-military exchanges to be cancelled. The suspension of US–China military-to-military contacts was enacted into law in 1990 by the US Congress. President George Bush's decision to sell F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan in 1992 further soured China's relations with Washington and deepened the PLA's resentment towards the United States.

In the fall of 1993, President Bill Clinton made the decision to fully re-engage China, including the PLA, but 'results were limited and the military relationship did not regain the closeness reached in the 1980s, when the United States and China cooperated strategically against the Soviet Union and such cooperation included arms

21. *Ibid.*

22. For details of the crucial role played by Deng Xiaoping in normalizing the relationship with the United States, see Ezra Vogle, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

23. *Deng Xiaoping Nianpu, 1975 to 1997 [Chronicle of Deng Xiaoping, 1975–1997]* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe), available at: <http://www.globalview.cn/ReadNews.asp?NewsID = 1769>.

24. *Ibid.*

sales to the PLA'.²⁵ A series of unfortunate encounters between China and the United States ensued, including: the search of the Yinhe, which the US suspected of carrying chemicals to Iran (August 1993); the American representative at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) casting a vote against China hosting the 2000 Olympic Games (1993); the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade (1999); and the collision of the Chinese military jet with an American spy plane (2001). For the Chinese military elite, these incidents were painful reminders that China did not command international respect and was vulnerable to encroachments because its military capability was still second-class.²⁶

At the same time, the United States and China became more economically interconnected with each other than ever before. After marathon negotiations with Washington, China was finally able to join the WTO in 2001. According to Robert D. Hormats, Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment, 'In 2011, the United States imported \$399 billion in goods from China and exported \$103 billion to China—a nearly four-fold increase in imports and a five-fold increase in exports in the 10 years since China joined WTO in 2001'.²⁷ Yet double-digit economic growth in the past 30 years did not benefit the military until the late 1990s and early 2000s. Since then, the PLA budget has been on a rapidly growing pace that has raised much concern in Washington, Tokyo and other capitals of Asian states. Various international think tanks estimate that China's military spending has risen from about US\$20 billion in 2002 to at least US\$120 billion in 2011. As reported by the *Washington Post*:

The increased spending has allowed the PLA to embark on a sweeping modernization program that includes new long-range cruise missiles, a new fleet of J-10 and J-11 fighter jets, an experimental stealth J-20 plane, a refurbished Soviet-era aircraft carrier and a growing space program, which includes China's own satellite navigation network.²⁸

Along with the growing capability of the Chinese military, substantial structural changes have also occurred within the PLA. First, the Chinese leadership no longer consists of military strongmen who are able to control the military and the civilian government all at one time. This gives the military for the first time in PRC history a relatively autonomous bargaining chip that it can manipulate against civilian control. In the age of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, we see a very consistent record of the Party leaders cultivating personal ties with the military through appointments and promotions.²⁹ But these ties built on pragmatic interests cannot secure military

25. Shirley A. Kan, *US–China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress*, (27 November 2012), available at: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32496.pdf>.

26. Liu, *Zhongguo Meng [The China Dream]*; Zhao, 'Foreign policy implications of Chinese nationalism revisited'.

27. Robert D. Hormats, *The Future of US–China Economic Relations*, (6 December 2012), available at: <http://www.state.gov/e/rls/rmk/2012/201631.htm>.

28. Leith Richburg, 'China's increasing military spending unnerves neighbors', *Washington Post*, (23 October 2012), available at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-10-23/world/35501019_1_chinese-diplomats-luo-yuan-military-growth.

29. Ji You, 'Jiang Zemin's command of the military', *The China Journal* 45, (January 2001), pp. 131–138; Zhiyue Bo, 'Hu Jintao's generals', *East Asian Policy*, (January–March 2011), pp. 45–51.

loyalty to the leadership. In the wake of the downfall of Bo Xilai, the CCP secretary general of Chongqing Municipality, there was a flurry of activity on the part of the senior military commanders appointed to the incumbent positions by Jiang Zemin to pledge allegiance to Hu Jintao, then chairman of the CMC. When Hu relinquished his CMC chairmanship to Xi Jinping at the end of the 18th Party Congress, the same thing happened again.

Second, the military elite is becoming more willing to transgress the traditional divide between politics and military affairs. With rising educational levels of military officers and extended exchanges between the PLA and the US army, the new generation of military officers is more confident and capable of articulating their personal views and military interests. Among them a group of ‘princeling generals’ in their fifties and sixties are the most assertive statist. Fundamentally, this is an irresolvable problem for the Chinese leadership. It reflects the conflict between the strategic aspirations of the new military corps and the political goals of the civilian leadership which came to power on a base of weak legitimacy. This conflict can hardly be reconciled under existing institutional arrangements.³⁰

The emerging consensus of the US threat: 2000s–2022³¹

Against this backdrop, we see a quick formation and consolidation of the consensus of the US threat among China’s military elite since the 2000s. It appears that the members of the CMC and the top generals of the PLA are very much in sync in their resentment against the US. A feeling of China being treated unfairly by the United States is deeply rooted in their prevailing thoughts and statements. General Chen Bingde, PLA’s former Chief of Staff, is believed to have told the visiting German Defense Minister the following words: ‘If one opposes the American government, he is a terrorist; if one opposes the People’s Republic of China, he wins a Nobel Peace Prize’.³² During his visit to the United States in 2011, General Chen even got emotional when talking about Taiwan. He accused the United States of using a domestic law (The Taiwan Relations Act) to intervene in China’s internal affairs: ‘This is *tai baqi* (too hegemonic)’.³³ ‘Hegemonic’ may not be the worst word to describe the US in the eyes of the PLA elite. Oftentimes the US is not only regarded as hegemonic but aggressive as well. During his visit to the US in October 2009, General Xu Caihou, Vice Chairman of the CMC, told over 300 US military personnel at the Center for International and Strategic Studies that the *Impeccable* incident in March of that year, and a confrontation between a US oceanic research ship and Chinese fishing boat in May, were all caused by the US military which had violated China’s rights in its special

30. For more details on these structural changes, see Ren, ‘China’s outspoken PLA officers in the mass media’.

31. The 20th National Congress of the CCP will be held in 2022 when Xi Jinping is expected to step down as China’s top leader.

32. ‘Zhongguo junfang jiangling zhize meiguo caozong nuobeier hepingjiang’ [‘Chinese general accuses the US of manipulating the Nobel Peace Prize’], *Deutsche Welle* [Voice of Germany], (3 November 2010).

33. See Chen Bingde’s talk during his visit to the US, 17–18 May 2011, available at: http://www.china.com.cn/military/txt/2011-05/20/content_22604529.htm.

economic zone. He declared that the US navy had committed aggression against China's legitimate interests.³⁴

To the 'princeling' generals, who are about ten years younger than General Chen Bingde and General Xu Caihou, their perceptions of the United States hardly change. General Liu Yuan is the political commissar of the PLA Department of General Logistics. His father was Liu Shaoqi, a former Chinese president who was purged by Mao Zedong and died during the Cultural Revolution. In his introduction to a book by Zhang Musheng, Liu's protégé and personal advisor, Liu Yuan suggests that even though China has substantial collaborative relations with the US, this does not change the nature of Washington. He believes that wars in the world are divided into just wars and unjust wars. Wars launched and conducted by the US cannot be just.³⁵ In the wake of the collapse of Gaddafi's regime and his violent death, General Liu was shaken. He allegedly said, 'Gaddafi's second son Saif, was brainwashed by the US, British and other Western intelligence agencies' and that Gaddafi's failure had much to do with his forsaking the once-strongly propagated 'Libyan values'.³⁶

General Liu Yazhou, political commissar of China's National Defense University, is seen by many as a pro-American liberal. He was a visiting scholar at Stanford University in the 1980s and subsequently visited the US multiple times. Despite his experience, General Liu seems to share the conviction that the US harbors ill-intentions against China. In his treatise *War against Taiwan* in 2001, he warns that the US still wants to destroy China's socialist system.³⁷ He believes that the US will not allow any state on the face of the earth to challenge its supremacy. Because of challenges to the US, Germany was defeated; Japan was crushed; and the Soviet Union lost the Cold War. As China is a rising power, Washington must see it as a dire threat.³⁸ In September 2012, General Liu wrote an introduction to the Chinese translation of *No Easy Day* which is about the mission that killed Osama Bin Laden. While the introduction is filled with admiration of the US military, he reasserted his view of the US as a state bent on preventing the rise of China: 'To the Americans, if Japan wins, they win; if Taiwan wins, they win; if regions inhabited by ethnic minorities win, they win'. Indeed, to General Liu, Americans are behind these three potential enemies of China and if China loses any of the wars, the Chinese state will collapse.³⁹

34. 'Xu Caihou cheng meijun qinhai zhongguo zhengdang liyi' ['Xu Caihou declares American army violating China's legitimate interests'], *People's Daily*, (27 October 2009), available at: <http://military.people.com.cn/GB/42967/10269682.html>.

35. Liu Yuan, 'Introduction to Zhang Musheng', in *Gaizao Women de Wenhua Lishiguan* [*Changing Our View of Culture and History*] (Junshi Kexue Chubanshe [Military Science Press], 2011). Also see Jeremy Page, "'Princeling' general attracts notice with criticism of party", *The Wall Street Journal*, (23 May 2011), available at: <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/05/23/chinese-general-attracts-notice-with-criticism-of-communist-party/?mod=WSJBlog>.

36. John Garnaut, 'Beware of Western hostile forces', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (11 November 2012), available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/beware-of-western-hostile-forces-20121110-294u0.html>.

37. Liu Yazhou, *Duitai zuozhan: zhanlue pinggu* [*War against Taiwan: A Strategic Evaluation*] (internal printing, 2001).

38. Liu Yazhou, *Meiguo lun* [*On America*] (internal printing, 2001), available at: http://bbs.tiexue.net/post_2660130_1.html.

39. Liu Yazhou, 'Zhanzheng xingtai bianhua yu jundui gaige' ['The changing formats of warfare and military reform'], in *Jiannan Yiri* [*No Easy Day*] (National Defence University Press, 2012), pp. 5–6.

This united and openly articulated resentment of the US resurging after three decades of China's reform and opening to the world is astonishing. Although the PLA has never trusted the US as a reliable partner, it hardly defined the US as a prime enemy since Mao's strategic reorientation in the late 1960s. The recommendation of the PLA marshals in 1969 to carry on Mao's initiation shows that even with limited information and ideological enmity in the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese military elite was able to make an objective evaluation of US intentions. Therefore the scope of bilateral exchanges and the amount of information is not so much a factor in determining the PLA perceptions towards the US. This is an important lesson to be learnt, because Washington has long embraced the conviction that increasing international cooperation and economic interdependence will 'domesticate' China and accommodate it in the existing world order. Yet our review of the PLA perceptions of the US shows that their perception change is mostly driven by their calculation of China's strategic interest, which is neither dependent on the level of bilateral exchanges nor on the calculation of economic interest alone. In the era of Mao and Deng, when the military elderly held high positions within the CCP and were able to discuss and decide policy through internal consensus, China's military interest was aired, coordinated and dominated by these elders who used to serve in the military. Therefore, China's military interest was always kept in line with the CCP's political interest. Yet in the post-Deng era, the separation of civilian and military elites made possible the rise of distinctive military appeals, strategic thoughts and ambitions that are not represented and checked by the civilian leadership. For the first time, the military is seen to air its unique views and try to become an agenda setter for China's strategic interest. To illustrate the implications of this change on China's foreign policy in the new era of Xi Jinping, in the rest of this article we will examine two cases of PLA reactions to international crises during the late era of Hu Jintao and the early months following Xi Jinping ascending to China's top leadership.

Recent PLA reactions to US arms sales to Taiwan

Selling weapons to Taiwan is mandated by the Taiwan Relations Act passed by the US Congress in the wake of President Carter's decision to normalize the relationship with China in December 1978. China has always strongly protested against each and every one of these sales since 1979. Previously, the PLA's response to these sales was limited to editorials in the *PLA Daily* or statements issued by the Defense Ministry. Yet this conventional response changed in January 2010 after President Obama made the decision to sell weapons to Taiwan. Outspoken PLA officers unleashed unprecedented attacks on the American decision and openly called for stronger retaliation against the US.

Yang Yi, a retired naval general who used to work at the Academy of Military Science, told reporters that he did not believe that the storm over the arms sales to Taiwan would pass very quickly this time, because:

Each time China protests, Americans come over to pacify, and the bilateral relations become normal again. This is a thing of the past. It will be different this time. If China's threats were just empty words, how could she be a true great power, and how could it hold Washington accountable to the Chinese people? This time, China must punish the United States.

Yang's argument deserves attention, because he explicitly connects China's reaction to US arms sales with China's changing status in the world. 'China must punish the United States', not so much because of the harm the United States has done to China's military security, but because it has a far-reaching impact on China's reputation as 'a true great power'. The strategic interest of 'a true great power', in the eyes of the PLA elite, is very different from a country only aspiring for wealth and security. Yet such an understanding of China's strategic interest, as held by General Yang, certainly has not arrived at any change in the policy implementation arena. This reflects in the fact that Yang's warning was at the strategic rather than the operational level. When asked what China could do to penalize Washington, General Yang was vague:

We have lots of ammunition we can use. Not only will we make the United States suffer economic losses, we will also shake the very foundation of its traditional mentality. In the past, it was always the United States rendering sanctions against other nations. China is now in a position to sanction against the United States. This will overthrow the traditional mentality of the American policymakers.

Yang acknowledged that China would also suffer when conducting sanctions against the United States, but this short-term pain could be easily compensated by long-term gains.⁴⁰ Meng Xiangqing, a researcher with the National Defense University, echoed General Yang's remarks. He told the same reporter that measures announced by the Chinese Foreign Ministry had no teeth in them and the Americans were fully aware of it. But Americans were very concerned about any potential new moves China might make.

This was the first time China had openly declared that there would be sanctions on US arms sales to Taiwan, as it would affect international and regional collaboration, arms control and nuclear proliferation. 'All these are America's sore spots. This shows that China is ready to wield her big sticks.' Meng added that China should make a timetable for the US to specify when it should stop selling arms to Taiwan. According to Meng, ten years from now, when China is reaching parity in defense capabilities with the United States, China can afford to have a showdown on arms sales to Taiwan. 'Showdown in ten years' became the sensational title of the report in the newspaper published by the Xinhua News Agency.⁴¹ Despite these calls for sanctions against the United States, the Chinese government did not act upon them.

As a case of comparison, we examined US arms sales to Taiwan one year later. In the last week of October 2011, the Obama administration decided once again to sell arms to Taiwan. The voice of the Chinese military was quite consistent in advocating a tit-for-tat response, even though the spokespersons from the Foreign Ministry and the Defense Ministry continued to make empty protests. Major General Luo Yuan of the Academy of Military Science told reporters that China should demand 'a tooth for tooth tactic from those who violate China's interests'. He even

40. Liang Hui and Yu Shengnan, 'Zhongguo jiangchu mengzhao zhenhan meiguo juecezh' ['China will adopt harsh measures to shake up American policymakers'], *The International Herald Tribune*, (5 February 2010).

41. *Ibid.*

suggested that China learn from Russia and deploy missiles against America.⁴² In his op-ed at the overseas edition of the *People Daily*, Major General Peng Guangqian of the National Defense University did not advocate sanctions against the United States, but he called on President Obama to learn from President Nixon and blaze a new trail in Sino-US relations by focusing more on strategic issues and less on the type of arms sales to Taiwan.⁴³ General Yang Yi repeated that China should raise the political cost of arms sales to Taiwan for the United States, though he was still very vague on how it could be done.

In general, the response to US arms sales articulated by the PLA elite was tougher and more substantial than their civilian counterparts. This does not mean that the PLA is no longer submitting their interest to the top civilian leadership. For example, in 2011, many PLA senior and mid-level officers would have liked to see Tsai Ing-wen win office in the 2012 Taiwan presidential election. The more intense the situation, the easier it would be for the PLA to ask for more resources to boost weapon systems research and acquisition.⁴⁴ But under the explicit policy of the civilian leadership to boost Ma Ying-jeou's chance of winning presidential re-election, the PLA's space for maneuver was limited. Indeed, at some critical time regarded by the top leadership, the PLA elite may need to display symbolic concession in their claims. Early in 2011, right before President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States, General Ma Xiaotian, the PLA's Vice Chief of Staff, published a major policy article indicating that the US and Chinese military could collaborate in many areas, including maintaining and promoting international and regional peace and stability, countering terrorism, nuclear proliferation and global crises. This article, according to one China watcher, is a major concession of the military to the top civilian leadership.⁴⁵ In our view, such a concession has only symbolic values at some designated times. General Ma's policy article is obviously not consistent with the PLA's persistent consensus on the US threat openly discussed and articulated by high-ranked officers in the mass media.

Our conclusion is that the PLA has been very upset by US arms sales to Taiwan, and has been actively seeking and advocating tit-for-tat sanctions. They are conscious of the infeasibility of their policy recommendations under the civilian leadership, but this does not discourage them from making open claims. They are politically sensitive and aware of the need to make symbolic concessions from time to time. Yet such concessions are at most symbolic and not taken seriously by the military elite. Compared to the civilian agencies in the government, they seem to have a clearer and more consistent view of China's strategic interest and dare to

42. 'Luo Yuan shaojiang cheng zhongguo keyi xiaofang eluosi dui meiguo yiya huanya' ['Major General Luo Yuan says China can learn from Russia and adopt a tooth for a tooth tactic towards the US'], *Sina.com*, (23 September 2011), available at: <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2011-09-23/0927666757.html>.

43. Peng Guangqian, *People's Daily*, overseas edition, (23 September 2011).

44. The first author's conversation with a PLA researcher in Beijing, 12 December 2011.

45. The first author's discussion with Huang Jing, Professor at the National University of Singapore, 10 March 2011; for Ma Xiaotian's article, see Ma Xiaotian, 'Women de lishi shiming he dandang' ['Our historical mission and responsibilities'], *Xuexi Shibao* [Study Times], (17 January 2011), available at: <http://www.politicalchina.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID = 199099>.

advocate for it. While it is hard to gauge the level of impact they have on the top leadership, a common difficulty in studying foreign policy decision making, we suggest that their major impact at the moment is injecting an organized new force into China's political market of strategic thoughts. Unlike academics of international relations and bureaucrats in the foreign policy arena, the PLA's strategic thoughts are underpinned by their organized interest, articulated with striking consistency, and advocated with persistent enthusiasm. The question is whether any other special interest group in China has such an effective, influential and successful public relations 'firm'.

Recent PLA reactions to the South China Sea and the Diaoyu Islands

The unprecedented national outburst over territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the East China Sea coincided with China's power transition that happens once every ten years. In both disputes, voices of the military elite helped fan public opinion and marshal popular support for a tougher position against countries like the Philippines and Japan. One of the themes perpetrated by the PLA 'pundits' is that, though on the surface it is Manila and Tokyo that are at odds with Beijing, the black hand of the growing regional hostility against China is actually Washington. In fact this theme was not a recent creation by the PLA opinion leaders but a theme they have harped on for a long time. For example, Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu's book *The China Dream*, published in 2009, declares that the twenty-first century will be a century of Sino-US rivalry and Washington will do everything to slow down China's rise. Senior Colonel Dai Xu's book *The C-Shaped Encirclement*, which came out in early 2010, introduces the idea that the Color Revolution in Central Asian countries and the changes taking place in Myanmar are all orchestrated by the United States. To them, Washington's plot to undermine China was not implemented only because of the difficulties the US has encountered. As Senior Colonel Lin Zhiyuan, an American expert at the Academy of Military Science, told *PLA Daily* reporters in late 2011, he believed that Washington's plan to dominate East Asia was interrupted by the Asian financial crisis and the long wars against terrorism. As the US pulls out of Iraq and Afghanistan, it is pivoting to Asia by enlarging the pro-America bloc, increasing collective security and increasing its military presence in the area.⁴⁶

In this clear-cut logic, the recent flare-ups in the South China Sea and the East China Sea have simply provided 'evidence' of the PLA theories. In an interview with the *China Youth Daily* in 2012, when the South China Sea dispute was intensifying, General Qiao Liang, the author of the sensational book *Unlimited Warfare*, put the blame squarely on the US for triggering the South China Sea crisis. He believed America's Asia pivot has emboldened some countries to confront China and pictured a very carefully deployed US conspiracy: after the financial crisis, Americans did not

46. Tian Yuan and Zhang Xin, 'Meiguo "chongfan yatai" zhanlve de beihou' ['Behind America's pivot to Asia and the Pacific'], *PLA Daily*, (26 December 2011), available at: http://chn.chinamil.com.cn/txjs/2011-12/26/content_4752340.htm.

have a lot of cards in their hand. Hence, they sought to drag China into a quagmire to deter its rise by manufacturing a series of incidents to unite Tokyo and Seoul. It then encouraged Hanoi and Manila to challenge China via joint military exercises, and began to relax sanctions on Myanmar with a view to drive a wedge between China and Myanmar. Meanwhile, it has also entered into discussion with Delhi to form a strategic partnership.⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that, though Colonel Lin and General Qiao make their case from different premises, they have reached a similar conclusion of US conspiracy. Major General Luo Yuan held a similar view that Southeast Asian countries are challenging China's sovereignty because the United States is backing them up. According to General Luo, regional issues should be handled regionally and the United States is responsible for the internationalization of the South China Sea dispute.⁴⁸ This conspiracy theory also applies to the Diaoyu Islands dispute. General Qiao considers that the essence of the Diaoyu Islands crisis is also a concealed confrontation between the United States and China. Washington's plan is to cause trouble around China's periphery and draw these periphery countries into a coalition against China. Therefore, the Chinese leadership should stay focused on the long-term goal and simply play along with Tokyo and Washington. Since the Japanese government has nationalized the islands, China could privatize it by selling them to Chinese developers.⁴⁹

While PLA officers share the conviction that the United States is behind the recent territorial disputes between China and neighboring states at sea, they also seem to believe the effective way to force Washington to back off is to teach American 'running dogs' a lesson. During a forum in Shenzhen held in October 2012, General Luo Yuan declared that China should dispatch hundreds of fishing boats to fight a maritime guerrilla war.⁵⁰ Despite his repeated denials, many Chinese netizens believe General Luo once said that one of the options Beijing has against Japan is to bombard Tokyo.⁵¹ While General Luo's proposal, whether it has been admitted or denied, may sound naive at the operational level, General Qiao Liang's suggestion is more straightforward. He believes that China can risk a small-scale conflict with the regional 'provocateurs' in order to force Washington to back down.⁵² Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu has produced a vivid metaphor of the PLA's perceptions of the US and its allies in the Asia-Pacific. Comparing the United States to a tiger and Japan to a wolf, Colonel Liu told Australian journalist John Garnaut, 'Of all the animals, Chinese

47. General Qiao Liang, 'Jiejue nanhai wenti yingxue meiguo keyi caqiang zouhuo' ['China can learn from the US in solving the South China Sea problem via risking small scale conflicts'], *China Youth Daily*, (29 August 2012).

48. 'Luo Yuan shaojiang: women bupa meiguo jieru nanhai wenti' ['Major General Luo Yuan: we are not afraid of American intervention in the South China Sea problem'], *Jinghua Shibao*, (5 May 2012).

49. 'Shiwei jiangjun: shoushi riben, yaoyou chongfen de junshi zhunbei' ['Ten Generals: to deal with Japan, we need to have full military preparation'], *Global Times*, (13 September 2012).

50. Christopher Bodeen, 'Outspoken China officers a challenge to the Party', *AP*, (28 October 2012), available at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/outspoken-china-officers-challenge-party>. Bodeen writes in the article, 'Luo's remarks reflect a challenge for China's leadership from a military increasingly willing to push the limits of the ruling Communist Party's official line on foreign relations, territorial claims and even government reforms'.

51. 'Luo Yuan's weibo zhizhan' ['The weibo war of Luoyuan'], *Political China*, (29 April 2013), available at: <http://www.politicalchina.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=228504>.

52. See 'Shiwei jiangjun', *Global Times*.

people hate the wolf the most'.⁵³ He has gone as far as suggesting nuking Japan if Japan repeats its mistake of invading another nation's territories. In the PLA's eyes, it seems all US allies in the region are small potatoes that can be warned or told not to do something. In the fashion of General Ren Haiquan publicly scolding the Japanese participants during the meeting in Melbourne, Liu Mingfu also asked Garnaut to tell the Australian Prime Minister that Australia should not follow the US or Japan into any military conflict with China.⁵⁴ These PLA elite will never tolerate an American linkage with the neighboring countries' 'misbehavior' towards China. As Washington is too strong for Beijing to have direct military confrontation with and there always exists an opportunity to exploit the tactic of divide-and-rule in an alliance, deterrence of US allies in the region is seen by the PLA as a more feasible strategy.

Furthermore, the tension between China and US regional allies presents a good opportunity for the PLA to develop coveted military capacity. All military want more resources. The Chinese PLA is no different. This coordinated campaign to hype up the allegation that Washington is the mastermind behind Asian countries' unruly acts helps the PLA generate pressure to make national defense one of the top priorities at the 18th Party Congress. It was during the middle of nationwide anti-Japanese demonstrations that China's first aircraft carrier training platform the *Liaoning* was commissioned by the PLA Navy (PLAN). Ge Lide, a uniformed professor at the National Defense University, told a group of defense students on 29 May 2012 that the issue in the South China Sea is not just about a few atolls but a big country's involvement. In order to deal with this complex situation in the South China Sea, Chinese military would need to develop more advanced weaponry. As Professor Ge said, the commissioning of the *Liaoning* on 25 September 2012 was one of the most important steps for China to turn its yellow-water navy into a blue-water navy and project its fighting capability to far-away waters.⁵⁵

The op-ed in the *Global Times* by General Qin Tian, Deputy Director of research at the National Defense University, perhaps best reflects this rationale of the PLA on emphasizing the US threat as well as the PLA's intention to make the case to the Chinese people and the top leadership. Using the potential Sino-Japanese military clash, General Qin speaks eloquently on the need to build up China's military capability. Although he dismisses Japan's ability to manipulate the situation to its advantage, he seriously warns of the threat and animosity from the US. Seeing the deficiency of China's military capability to meet the bottom line of its national security, General Qin admonishes the great risks China is facing in national security. The fact that China is the only non-unified great power, according to the knowledge of General Qin, is a dangerous signal of China's weakness. He also believes that it is

53. Liu Mingfu, 'Baquan de huanghun: weishenme yao "tanhe meiguo"?' ['The dusk of the hegemon: why should we impeach America?'], *Political China*, (23 January 2013), available at: <http://www.politicalchina.org/Newsinfo.asp?NewsID=227572>.

54. John Garnaut, 'Shun US "tiger" and Japanese "wolf", Chinese colonel warns', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (22 January 2013), available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/shun-us-tiger-and-japanese-wolf-chinese-colonel-warns-20130122-2d52d.html>.

55. See a report of his presentation to Guangxi University available at: <http://newgxu.cn/html/2012-05/112089.htm>; see Ge's interview with the media available at: http://news.cjn.cn/gnxw/201209/t2061939_1.htm.

difficult for great powers to have trust in each other and that real cooperation can only be derived from real power. The only solution to the dangers, given by General Qin, is developing China's military capability.⁵⁶

Conclusions

In the case of US arms sales to Taiwan and the case of the South China Sea and the Diaoyu Islands, we see an active and assertive group of PLA elite who came out to build a unique narrative of China's strategic goals and make policy recommendations on all possible occasions. In both cases, they maintained consistency and outspokenness, though they would make symbolic concessions and soften their expression when the top leadership requests. The issue at stake is that the civilian leadership today is simply not able to stop the military elite from openly discussing China's strategic interest at most of the time. Besides the structural changes that prevent the civilian leadership from doing so, the complicating security environment China is facing also increases the demand for strategic deliberation and articulation. From this perspective, China has entered into a new era where national security issues are to be openly debated and discussed.

In this article, we do not attempt to assess how much political influence these PLA officers have on decision making at the top, because there is no sufficient data to measure the impact. According to David Lague,

In a political system where civilian officials hew to tightly-scripted public positions, these uniformed pundits, both serving and retired, appear free to go well beyond the official line . . . Foreign military analysts are uncertain if the hawks represent a majority opinion in the 2.3 million-strong military or exercise real influence over foreign policy. It is also unclear if operational commanders share the views of these so-called 'activist officers'.⁵⁷

Lague has made a good point that these outspoken military men cannot be taken on the surface as indicative of changes in China's national policies, but we should also pay attention to other important dimensions of this new phenomenon. First, as Nathan and Scobell state in *China's Search for Security*, even though Chinese civilian leaders have been responsible for making decisions on matters of war and peace, many crisis-leading incidents may be linked to the invisible hand of the Chinese military. These incidents include, among others:

the collision between a Chinese fighter plane and an American EP-3 surveillance aircraft in 2001 in the vicinity of Hainan Island, an unannounced anti-satellite test in January 2007, Chinese harassment of the *USNS Impeccable* in 2009, and a variety of clashes and near clashes with Japanese and American ships at various times in the East China Sea, around the Diaoyutai (Senkaku) Islands, and elsewhere.⁵⁸

56. 'Weilai shinian zhongguo anquan xingshi hui ehua?' ['Will China's national security situation deteriorate in the next ten years?'], *Global Times*, (26 December 2012), available at: <http://mil.huanqiu.com/observation/2012-12/3418443.html>.

57. David Lague, 'China's military hawks takes the offensive', *Reuters*, (17 January 2013), available at: <http://www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USBRE90G00C20130117>.

58. Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

Therefore, at the operational level, the top leadership can hardly avoid military ‘accidents’ that may lead to severe diplomatic crises.

Moreover, the PLA’s words have aggravated the tensions between China and its powerful neighbors such as Japan, Vietnam and India. As reported by David Lague, the Japanese government has become increasingly concerned with the growing role of the PLA in shaping foreign policy. Japan is seeing that as a security risk. In its 2012 defense white paper, Tokyo says that the degree of PLA influence on foreign policy decisions could possibly be changing and ‘the situation calls for attention as a risk management issue’.⁵⁹ In other words, the actual influence of these PLA officers can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, becoming more and more important as other states perceive the influence of the PLA to be growing in the process of foreign policy decision making.

Finally, the different characters and backgrounds of the top leadership may also affect the chances of the PLA to exert an influence on foreign policy. Though it is still too early to evaluate the orientation of Xi Jinping’s foreign policy at this stage, it is clear that Xi has a different character and background to his predecessor Hu Jintao. Less than a month after he became secretary general of the CCP and chairman of the CMC, Xi traveled to Guangdong Province, inspected a field army there and issued the call for a rich country and a strong military. He said, ‘To realize the great revival of the Chinese nation, we must preserve the bond between a rich country and a strong military, and strive to build a solid national defense and a strong military’.⁶⁰ Xi has also been actively promoting his new political ideology—the ‘Chinese dream’, the meaning of which is nebulous except for two things: reiteration of the great goal of reviving the Chinese nation and emphasis on the role of Chinese nationalism.

Upon Xi’s succession to power, the senior military leaders of China have been echoing Xi’s call to be prepared for war. During a recent inspection of the troops and military facilities in Shandong and Henan Provinces, Xu Qiliang, new Deputy Chairman of the CMC, told troops that they ‘must do everything to focus on winning wars’.⁶¹ Xi’s rhetoric, if not policies, has deviated from that of Hu Jintao, who in the past decade was always careful to describe China’s strategy in dealing with the outside world as ‘peaceful development’—a political term adapted from ‘peaceful rise’, a slightly different term which the then top leadership thought might trigger security concerns of other countries. Some sharp China watchers have also observed this change. Jeremy Page of *The Wall Street Journal* filed a report entitled ‘For Xi, a “China dream” of military power’ on 12 March 2013. As Page finds,

Mr. Xi has also made high-profile visits to army, air force, space program and missile command facilities in his first 100 days in office, something neither of his two immediate predecessors did. He has taken personal control of China’s military response to a newly

59. See Lague, ‘China’s military hawks takes the offensive’.

60. ‘Jianchi fuguo he qiangjun xiangtongyi’ [‘Insist on combining building a strong nation and building a strong military’], *People’s Daily*, (13 December 2012), available at: http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2012-12/13/nw.D110000renmrb_20121213_3-01.htm.

61. Kathrin Hille, ‘Return of warlike rhetoric from China’, *Financial Times*, (22 January 2013), available at: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e3765616-647d-11e2-9711-00144feab49a.html>.

inflamed territorial dispute with Japan. And he has launched a campaign to enhance the military's capacity to 'fight and win wars'.⁶²

The 18th Party Congress has called for building 'powerful armed forces that are commensurate with China's international standing'.⁶³ It seems that the rhetoric of the generals and that of China's top leadership have become more synchronized. It is clear that Xi and the new leadership will need a lot more nationalism and military support to bolster the CCP's legitimacy and ability to rule in the coming years. Yet it is not clear at the moment if the perceptions of the United States held by the PLA elite will remain just perceptions, writings and talks.

62. Jeremy Page, 'For Xi, a "China dream" of military power', *The Wall Street Journal*, (12 March 2013), available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324128504578348774040546346.html>.

63. See Hille, 'Return of warlike rhetoric from China'.