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As the world’s leading military powers invent new weapons systems, other nations develop countermeasures. “China has no illusions about its military inferiority via-à-vis the United States and knows that the status is likely to endure for at least two decades,” explains security analyst Loro Horta. “As such the PLA has been developing a full range of asymmetric strategies to deter the US until its military reaches maturity.” Horta describes the rapid modernization of China’s military and its study of history, especially the experiences of underdogs who prevailed in war. China's ambitious projects include anti-satellite missiles, lasers and the DF-21A anti-ship ballistic missile that could target aircraft carriers. Asymmetric strategies are the dominant force of China’s military, even as the country invests in and builds technological capability. Horta urges the United States and other nations to recognize and appreciate China's full range of asymmetric strategies even as technology matures. – YaleGlobal

**The Dragon’s Spear: China’s Asymmetric Strategy**

China’s asymmetric capabilities have the potential to lessen US military advantage

Loro Horta

YaleGlobal, 17 October 2013

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| http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/sites/default/files/images/2013/10/horta1.jpg |
| Stealthy defense: Chinese shore-to-ship DF-21A missile could hit US aircraft carriers, top; Chinese designed stealth fighter J20 unveiled |

BEIJING: Over a decade ago the Federation of American Scientists described the Chinese missile program as a pocket of excellence in an otherwise problematic indigenous military industry. In 2010 the Chinese military was reported to have started tests on its most ambitious missile project, the DF-21A, an anti-ship ballistic missile. In early 2013 several reports claimed that the missile had begun to be deployed in small numbers in Southern China. The DF-21A is reportedly designed to be an aircraft carrier killer aimed at deterring US aircraft-carrier battle groups from interfering in case of conflict over Taiwan and other flashpoints like the South China Sea.

China’s decision to use ballistic missiles for anti-ship warfare is unusual considering that targeting moving ships with a missile on a ballistic trajectory is much harder and requires more sophisticated navigation than cruise missiles. The People’s Liberation Army decision to opt for an anti-ship ballistic missile, or ASBM, reflects the growing confidence and sophistication of its military industries.

Analysts are divided over the implications of the new system for the US military. Some, not surprisingly, claimed that it is a game-changer and a threat to US forces in the region. Other analysts observed that the US military has several ways of defeating the ASBM such as using decoys and by targeting Chinese support and communication systems. While both sides of the debate have raised valid points, one should not see the Chinese ASBM in isolation, but as part of larger process of military modernization and a changing doctrine in the PLA.

Chinese military strategists have for millenniums been fascinated by asymmetric methods of warfare. China has no illusions about its military inferiority vis-à-vis the United States and knows that the status is likely to endure for at least two decades.

As such the PLA has been developing a full range of asymmetric strategies to deter the US until its military reaches maturity. Aware of the US dependence on space and satellite communications to conduct even the most basic military operations, the PLA has for the past decade invested significant amounts to develop anti-satellite weapons. In January 2007 China fired its first anti-satellite missile destroying one of its own aging satellites in outer space. In May 2013 China fired a rocket carrying no payload over 10,000 kilometers into outer space, the highest launch since the mid-1970s. The absence of a payload such as a satellite could suggest the rocket is designed as an anti-satellite weapon.

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In addition to ballistic missiles and rockets, China has also experimented with green and blue laser weapons with the US military accusing China of firing several laser beans at its satellites. Laser pulses can disrupt satellite communication and depending on the strength could destroy it.

China’s missile program has also progressed steadily in the area of cruise missiles with accuracy and range improving rapidly. Progress in missiles, which one would expect as a result of greater advances in China’s space program, is demonstrated by the growing number of satellite launches and the program’s growing sophistication. China’s lunar program is a further reflection of the priority it attaches to space.

The PLA’s asymmetric warfare strategy is not limited to the domain of outer space, but extends to the other domains of battle – land, sea, air and cyberspace. For instance at sea, the Chinese PLA Navy is not focusing on matching the US carrier for carrier or ship for ship as some might expect.  China has been deploying a growing number of attack submarines, both conventionally powered and nuclear powered, with submarines accounting for 45 percent of its naval combatants, the highest percentage among the world’s major navies. In addition to submarines, the Chinese navy is deploying thousands of land-based missiles, both ballistic and cruise types. The navy is also developing dozens of stealth fast-attack missile craft and corvettes such as the Hubei class catamaran. In narrow seas and close coastal environments, these vessels can be quite effective against larger craft, particularly if deployed in swarm tactics.

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Another area fast emerging as a pocket of excellence in the PLA is cyberwarfare. Since 2000 Chinese military scholars have discussed the concept of total war or unrestricted warfare in which the PLA would use asymmetric tactics in all domains of the battle space.

The most popularized work on Chinese asymmetric warfare is a book written by two PLA colonels in 1999 entitled [“Unrestricted Warfare,” or 超限战,](http://www.shuku.net:8082/novels/wars/cxzh/cxzh.html) which literally means war without boundaries. Recent cyberattacks and intrusions into sensitive targets of US and other advanced nations demonstrate the growing strength of China’s cyberwarfare.

In recent years, Chinese military educational institutions such as the Academy of Military Sciences, the National Defense University and the Naval Institute have devoted considerable time studying campaigns of Western militaries confronting stronger opponents. Israeli-Arab conflicts, including the second Lebanon war, provide the Chinese with countless examples in which sea-based missiles caused severe damage to an advanced navy.

While China’s fascination with asymmetric warfare is not new, it is fast moving from the theoretical realm to the practical, and this is emerging as its dominant approach. This is not to suggest that the PLA will rely solely on asymmetric strategies. Indeed as China closes the technological gap, many of its strategies will come to resemble those of more established powers. Considering China’s millennial fascination the asymmetric element will likely remain a dominant strategy. In contrast, the US military has regarded asymmetric and other forms of unconventional warfare with marginal interest. The so-called US style of warfare focuses on offensive firepower and tends to neglect the defensive elements.

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The question is not whether the United States is capable of countering a particular system or not, but whether it’s capable of appreciating the nature of an asymmetric strategy across all domains of the battle space.  As noted at the US Naval Postgraduate School by US Navy Captain Scot Jaspar, with more than 30 years of experience and specializing on antisubmarine warfare:

“The combination of ballistic and cruise missile in conjunction with submarines and stealth fast missile graft could prove deadly for an aircraft carrier. Large numbers of missile with modern counter measures against jamming could saturate our most advance systems such as the Aegis.”

Indeed, during the 2006 war against Israel, Hezbollah fired a Chinese-made missile, the C802 supplied by Iran, at an Israeli Eilat class corvette, killing four sailors. The Eilat-class corvette is considered to be the most advanced ship of its kind in the world.

While the United States will maintain military superiority for the foreseeable future, China’s asymmetric capabilities have the potential to mitigate this advantage. This could have a positive effect in the sense that both great powers deter each other. China and the United States have grown increasingly economic interdependent, sharing many common interests. This lucrative relationship may reduce the chance for tension.  However, one should remember, in both world wars of the previous century, Germany was Britain’s largest trade partner.

Loro Horta is a graduate of the People’s Liberation Army National Defense University senior officers’ course, the US Naval Post Graduate School and the US National Defense University. He has won several awards for his research on Asian security issues.