

THE CHINA QUESTION: ASSESSING THE MILITARY CAPABILITY OF THE RISING POWER

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The rapid economic and political rise of China in the last decade has raised questions about China's military power. This paper aims to accurately assess China's military capability and its implications for United States' interests in East Asia. I first address the question: Is China a global military superpower, and if not, is it positioned to become one? I argue that China is not a superpower but a regional power, and will remain so for the conceivable future even if its economy continues to surge. I then address the question: Which of China's security concerns in East Asia has significant implications for American interests in that region? I show that the Taiwan issue is most likely to affect American interests in East Asia, and argue that the US should articulate its position on the issue more clearly than it presently does. The accurate evaluation of China's military power and the articulation of American policy towards China are crucial because there is an alarming discrepancy between the US and the Chinese views of the Sino-American relationship.

DISCREPANCY IN THREAT PERCEPTION

The September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center had significant implications not only on international politics but also on the theoretical basis of international relations. On the theoretical level, the event can be explained as follows: the only superpower state in the international system was attacked on its homeland by a seemingly irrational, non-state actor whose internal composition is anything but unitary. For the United States, its newfound sense of vulnerability was derived not only from the actuality of the attacks but also from the unconventional source of the attacks. The US started to identify sources of threat in sub-state level activities across the international system. For the rest of the international community, however, the events of September 11th 2001 did not constitute a dramatic shift of a theoretical nature. For many states, the world is still a unipolar system defined by the overwhelming presence of the United States. Moreover, states that remain skeptical of American hegemony,

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including China, continue to perceive the lone superpower as a source of threat. When the United States shifted its attention across levels of analysis, it created a discrepancy in threat perceptions.

THE AMERICAN VIEW OF CHINA

In the wake of the terrorist attacks, the United States recognized the importance of China as a strategic partner. This is evident in the *National Security Strategy* published by the current Bush Administration in 2002, which emphasizes the Sino-American collaboration on significant security issues including the war on terrorism and stability on the Korean peninsula (Office of the President 27). The cautionary remarks on Chinese policies focuses on topics like gas emission, world trade, and human rights, and only on two occasions in the 35-page document is the Chinese military discussed as a potential threat. Eager to solicit Beijing's collaboration in monitoring terrorist activities in Asia, the Bush Administration conveys the image that the United States "[welcomes] the emergence of a strong, peaceful, and prosperous China" (Office of the President 27).

This sense of optimism is mixed with a more cautious attitude towards China that was characteristic of American policy before the terrorist attacks. The *National Security Strategy* published under the Clinton Administration, for example, had listed a series of "key security objectives" vis-à-vis China and described the American policy towards that state as being "both principled and pragmatic" (The White House 36). More recently, Washington's cautionary tone is evident in its vocal opposition to the potential lifting of the Chinese arms embargo by the European Union. The EU, motivated by a series of economic and strategic incentives, has declared its intention to lift the embargo that has been in place since the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. Washington has expressed particular concerns about the potential export of high-technology and communications equipment that would improve China's battlefield management. In short, the United States identifies China as both a crucial ally for the containment of terrorist activities in Asia and a potentially hostile nuclear state. It is therefore sending mixed—if not often contradictory—signals to Beijing.

THE CHINESE VIEW OF THE UNITED STATES

The signals coming from Beijing are less subtle, as the optimism and the "welcoming" feeling are not reciprocated in the Chinese perception of international relations. To be sure, China is today militarily more secure than it has ever been in the last century. At the end of the nineteenth centu-

ry, China was experiencing colonial dismemberment and internal imperial decay, and had just suffered defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. For the first half of the twentieth century, much of the country lay in ruins from civil wars and invasion and occupation by the Japanese forces. Today, though, China enjoys a considerable strategic stability despite some outstanding territorial disputes with its neighbors. As General Xiong Guangkai, vice-chief of staff and the president of the think tank China Institute of International Strategic Studies (CIISS) observes, “China enjoys a more favorable security environment than at any time since the founding of the PRC, despite the development of factors of instability in its surrounding areas” (qtd. in Shambaugh 285).

Nevertheless, Xiong’s optimism is an exception in the generally pessimistic threat perception in the Chinese military. Chinese leaders are particularly skeptical of the United States’ intentions, which they perceive as a threat to both world peace and China’s own national security. This attitude is reflected in the “New Security Concept,” a group of ideas enunciated by Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and Minister of Defense Chi Haotian in 1997. The New Security Concept, which David Shambaugh describes as “China’s official prescriptive view of how international relations should be conducted and security maintained,” can be regarded as the Chinese counterpart of the American *National Security Strategy* (293). The New Security Concept attests to the Chinese perception that the American military alliances throughout the world are implicitly or explicitly aimed at the containment of China (Shambaugh 292-293).

The skepticism expressed in the New Security Concept continues to be prevalent, as the 2000 Defense White Paper suggests. It attests to the persisting concern that:

Certain big powers are pursuing “neo-interventionism,” “neo-gun-boat diplomacy,” and “neo-economic colonialism,” which are seriously damaging the sovereignty, independence, and developmental interests of many countries, and threatening world peace and security ...The United States is further strengthening its military presence and bilateral military alliances in the region, and is advocating the [theatre missile defense] system, and is planning to deploy it in East Asia (qtd. in Shambaugh 298).

Individual military officers have also voiced their concerns about the United States. Retired General Chen Kaizeng, vice president of CIISS, wrote in 2000 that:

the strength of the United States has intensified its lust for leading the world and its tendency of expansionism ... The attempt to maintain the hegemonist status and seek a monopolar world has constituted an important divergence between the United States and other powers (qtd. in Shambaugh 297).

The director of the Strategy Department at the Academy of Military Sciences echoes this view:

Since the end of the Cold War the United States has been seeking to build a unipolar world exclusively dominated by itself. Relying on its strong military capabilities, commandeering the support of Western developed countries, and exploiting religious conflicts, ethnic contradictions, and territorial disputes around the world, it has willingly interfered in the internal affairs of other countries and intervened in regional conflicts, in a effort to expand its area of dominion (qtd. in Shambaugh 297).

Although Chinese officers are often unable to reach a consensus on issues of national security, one item that consistently appears on every official's list of concerns is the destabilizing force of the US. In contrast to the American attitude observed in the Bush Administration's *National Security Strategy*, the Chinese leaders regard American military influence in East Asia as threatening and unacceptable.

CHINA AS A SUPERPOWER?

Given the discrepancy between the American and the Chinese views of the Sino-American relationship, it is necessary to assess accurately China's military strength and the extent to which it poses a threat to American national security. As Coral Bell points out, "almost every commentator has for some years been regarding China as the likeliest of the usual suspects for future 'peer competitor' status" (56). For example, Robert Kagan argues that China seeks "in the long term to challenge America's position as the dominant power in the world." It is unlikely, however, that China will acquire sufficient military capabilities to accomplish such goal in the conceivable future. The current People's Liberation Army (PLA)—a general term designating all Chinese armed forces—lacks the educated personnel, technology, and equipment necessary to obtain superpower status. The impressive growth of China's economy, even if it continues, will not directly translate into military power. Despite its nuclear status, China will not

become the superpower that challenges American hegemony and restores bipolarity to the currently unipolar international system.

PRESENT STATE OF THE PLA

In stark contrast to the American armed forces that boast highly educated professionals amongst its ranks, the PLA suffers from the persistent shortage of personnel with appropriate education and training. As Richard K. Betts and Thomas J. Christensen point out, modern military effectiveness is “less a matter of pure firepower than of the capacity to coordinate complex systems” (19). In the United States, “the essence of [the revolution in military affairs (RMA)] lies in the interweaving of capacities in organization, doctrine, training, maintenance, support systems, weaponry and the overall level of professionalism” (Betts and Christensen 19). The PLA lacks the number of personnel who are capable of operating such complex systems. As a result, even when China is successful in obtaining such technologies, the PLA has had a “poor record of technology assimilation and reverse engineering” (Shambaugh 248).

Such advanced technologies, moreover, are not readily available to the PLA. In the wake of World War II, China relied heavily on Soviet assistance for the procurement of military technology. Sino-Soviet relations soured during the Cold War, however, and in the summer of 1960, the Soviet Union abruptly withdrew its technology, advisors and funds from China. Since then, China has for the most part operated under a self-imposed self-reliance policy, which Evan Feigenbaum has described as “technological nationalism” (101). But as Shambaugh points out, “advancing science and technology requires close and regular interaction among professionals—at conferences, electronically or verbally, and through key publications” (245). Since the founding of the PRC, Chinese scientists and technicians have had only partial and sporadic access to the international defense industry community. Furthermore, the Chinese defense industry is also strictly separated from the civilian sector and this division has prevented the cross-industry sharing of information that would be mutually beneficial:

The sheer desire to centralize and control defense research and production instead of decentralizing and decontrolling it has proven a tremendous impediment to competition and innovation [in the PLA] (Shambaugh 248).

The inefficiency of bureaucratic control has “contributed to redundant

production and overcapacity,” and “rigid compartmentalization and obsessive secrecy have reinforced these organizational drawbacks” (Shambaugh 248). Lack of access to both the international defense community and the domestic civilian industry is fatal for the PLA’s military research and development.

The result of the technological isolation has been less than impressive, as China’s defense-industrial complex has failed to deliver the technology required to produce high-end weapons and electronics. Such ineffectiveness is documented in a United States Department of Defense document called *Militarily Critical Technologies List* released in 1996. The list includes 6,000 technologies—including 2,060 that are “militarily significant” and an additional 84 that are “militarily crucial”—for which different nations are given scores according to their capabilities. The list assessing China shows that with the exception of two categories—nuclear weapons and nuclear materials processing—China has few or none of the 84 “militarily crucial” technologies. The PLA’s recent effort for technological progress has mainly focused on the development of such strategies as lasers, electronic jamming, computer viruses and computer hackers. Attention to technologies that create problems for adversaries rather than overpower them marks “the clearest example of Chinese military elites accepting the PLA’s inferior overall capabilities” (Christensen 27).

Finally, the PLA’s lack of technology results in its inability to produce state of the art military equipment. The PLA boasts a large number of equipment like tanks and fighter planes, but most of them are antiquated and are no match for the United States. For example, as of 2000, the PLA Air Force had 2,543 fighters in operation. 2,300 of them, however, were various models of J-6 and J-7 fighters, which entered production in 1963 and 1967 respectively. This figure will not improve dramatically, as J-6 and J-7 fighters are expected to still account for approximately 60 percent of the fighters in 2005 (Shambaugh 264). Perhaps most critically, the PLA has so far failed to construct or purchase any aircraft carriers despite numerous reports of such attempts. The lack of an aircraft carrier severely limits the PLA’s power projection capabilities, as it is unable to send and sustain combat troops far from home. In this respect, the PLA is inferior even to the militaries of such neighboring states as Thailand and India, which possess aircraft carriers. Over all, the general capabilities of the Chinese armed forces are estimated to be at least twenty years behind those of advanced Western militaries (Shambaugh 243). Moreover, even when the PLA is successful in producing modern equipment, it is rarely capable of doing so in sufficient quantity (Christensen 25). The present inventory of China’s conventional weaponry suggests that the PLA is in no position to directly

challenge the United States militarily.

Chinese leaders acknowledge the deficiency of the PLA and are striving to build a superior military. The display of American military capabilities during the 1990s in Iraq, Kosovo, and Serbia shocked Chinese leaders and prompted them to install measures that would modernize the PLA. It is possible to observe the sense of urgency in Chinese sources such as a 1995 article for *China Military Science* by Chang Mengxiong, a member of the Committee of Science, Technology, and Industry at the System Engineering Institute. Chang writes that:

[information-intensified weapons] will be able to be launched from outside the enemy firepower network and identify and attack targets. Their circular probable error of target accuracy will be close to nil. The Gulf War has already demonstrated that accurate guided weapons are the basic firepower of high-technology warfare ... In the 21st century, all weapons, with the exception of rifles and machine guns, will be information intensified (qtd. in Pillsbury 249).

In another account, Naval Captain Shen Zhongchang, Naval Lieutenant Commander Zhang Haiying, and Naval Lieutenant Zhou Xinsheng argue that:

The concept of using tactical mobility of all weapons delivery platforms to first seize advantageous positions and then attack will likely become obsolete or even disappear, with long-range battle concepts such as “remote grappling” and “over-the-horizon strikes” becoming the key forms of battle in future naval warfare ... From the local wars since the 1980s, particularly the high-tech Gulf War, it is not hard to see that trend (qtd. in Pillsbury 275).

Chinese leaders are clearly aware that the “Gulf War was a trial of strength between two military systems,” and that they must acquire such systems in order to compete with the United States (qtd. in Pillsbury 279).

THE NUCLEAR FACTOR

The one aspect of the current PLA that the United States cannot dismiss, of course, is its nuclear inventory. The PLA currently maintains that its official policy is “No First Use.” This claim is credible, if only because the relatively small size of China’s current nuclear arsenal does not allow the PLA to strike the United States first. The PLA has adapted a retaliato-

ry targeting strategy, therefore using its nuclear capabilities as a deterrent. According to a recent study by Joanne Tompkins, however, Chinese officials feel the need to increase their nuclear inventory in response to recent American nuclear policy. The study finds that Chinese leaders are particularly concerned about the American withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which they perceive as a clear indicator of American interest in pursuing a missile defense system. They argue that such defense system would increase the United States' immunity, and as a result, Washington would pursue its recently articulated preemptive doctrine more boldly. Moreover, Chinese officials are not convinced by Washington's assurance that the missile defense system does not target China. Some point out that the US has consulted South Korea, Japan, Australia, and India on the missile defense program but has not sent a delegation to Beijing. Chinese leaders are skeptical of American strategic intentions, and many argue that the PLA must accelerate its nuclear modernization to safeguard against the United States.

FUTURE PROSPECTIVE: THE ECONOMIC GROWTH FACTOR

The PLA currently faces the need for personnel reform, technology and equipment procurement, and nuclear modernization—all of which are costly. It is frequently argued that China will accomplish such military R&D because its robust economic growth will soon translate into formidable military strength. Joseph S. Nye Jr., for example, argues that “as long as China’s economy does grow, it is likely that its military power will increase” (20). Singaporean researchers Qian Sun and Qiao Yu conducted a detailed study to identify the factors that have determined China’s military expenditures between the years 1965 and 1993. Using both the official Chinese data published in *Statistical Yearbook of China*—which many researchers abroad regard with skepticism—and the figures estimated by the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Sun and Yu find that there is a high level of correlation between China’s GNP and military expenditure. Such research suggests that as China’s economy continues to grow, its military expenditure will increase and the PLA will be modernized accordingly.

Although Sun’s and Yu’s study is thorough and persuasive, it is doubtful that China’s military expenditure will continue to grow in correlation with its economy and that the PLA will be sufficiently modernized as a result. This paper does not address the possibility that China’s economy will not continue to surge, although there is compelling evidence that suggest such outcome. Rather, it argues that even if the Chinese economy sus-

tains its growth, it is unlikely to result in a significant modernization of the PLA. Given the particularly decentralized nature of China's current economic boom, the degree of correlation between the economic growth and the PLA's strength is likely to decrease.

First, the central government in Beijing does not have firm control over China's current economic growth and is therefore unable to channel the fruits of that growth towards the modernization of the PLA. The present Chinese economic surge is largely a result of the decentralization of economic policy and China's gradual adaptation to market economy. This has been the case especially during the last decade, a period not covered by Sun's and Yu's research. Before China's gradual transition to market economy, the powerful State Planning Commission (SPC) had the sole authority of economic decision-making. But this authority has since decentralized to the local governments, and the SPC has been converted into a less dictatorial National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). The present NDRC lacks the ability to tax the provinces properly and to impose its policies. According to Wang Yiming, vice-president of the NDRC's Academy of Macroeconomic Research, the central government has gone from issuing orders to merely "trying to convince local governments that the center's policies are in their own best interests" ("The Emperor").

Similarly, Beijing does not have firm control over the emerging private sector, which is largely responsible for China's economic dynamism. By one estimate, there are 30 million private companies that serve the growing Chinese middle class by offering such products as insurance, consumer goods and the Internet ("Milking"). The private sector is growing by 20 percent per year, twice the pace of the economy, and currently account for 60 percent of the GDP ("Milking"). Moreover, this vibrant sector is almost entirely financed by foreign venture capitalists and private equity investors, since Beijing imposes restrictions upon the state banks' lending to the private sector. As Wang concedes, the NDRC finds the private sector even more difficult to regulate than the local governments ("The Emperor"). Victor Shih of Northwestern University concurs, saying that "there are huge sums of private money sloshing around that Beijing cannot control" ("The Emperor"). The very processes responsible for China's economic surge—decentralization and privatization—are making it difficult for Beijing to benefit directly from that economic growth. As China's economy becomes increasingly liberalized, Beijing must introduce effective measures to control and tax the provinces and the private sector if it is to translate economic growth into military spending.

Second, China's economic liberalization will prove costly rather than beneficial for the central government, at least in the short term. The eco-

conomic transition will inevitably involve banking reform and the restructuring of inefficient state owned enterprises (SOEs). As of 1999, there were approximately 350,000 SOEs that employ over 70 million workers, pay benefit to another 20 million retirees and in total support about another 200 million dependents (Zweig 67). 45 percent of these SOEs are said to be in the red, with their combined debt amounting to \$75 billion (Zweig 67). David Zweig argues that the SOE reform would involve the foreclosure of many, which would put ten to twelve million workers out of work (67). But “recent eyewitness reports from Sichuan Province tell that threats of worker violence have so frightened managers that they hesitate to fire workers until they have been retrained and helped to find a new job” (Zweig 67). At least in the short term, economic liberalization will impose upon Beijing the financial burden of creating jobs in order to facilitate the transition and maintain the present growth.

Finally, the PLA itself is highly decentralized, and is unable to use its budget efficiently even if Beijing were to successfully channel funds towards military modernization. From the inception of the PLA, its individual training units have engaged in sideline businesses, growing much of its own food supply, raising its own animals, and cultivating the land. Such involvement in non-military activities was institutionalized in January 1985, with the Central Military Commission’s “Decision on Strengthening Financial Work in the Armed Forces.” Designed to compensate for the decreasing budget allocation to the PLA at the time, the decision prompted virtually all units to establish individual commercial activities. “PLA Inc.,” as it came to be known abroad, reached its peak in the mid 1990s when the number of PLA companies was estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000 (Shambaugh 200). The commercialization severely hindered Beijing’s central control, as regional units often diverted military resources for commercial use. In 1989, a Jinan Military Region investigation found that a tank regiment had diverted 53 percent of its allocated fuel and 70 percent of its artillery regiment to commercial endeavors (Shambaugh 202). The control of human resources also proved difficult as some soldiers started to enlist in order to take advantage of the business opportunities. Business operations included brothels, karaoke bars, and prostitution circles, and in 1989, *Jiefangjun Bao*, the official PLA daily, reported that many units were falsifying training reports while engaging in commercial activities (qtd. in Shambaugh 201). In 1990, it reported that soldiers were using their wages to hire substitutes for their military duties, because the business operations promised a higher rate of return (qtd. in Shambaugh 201). The Central Military Commission, State Council, and the Chinese Communist Party finally banned all PLA commercial activities in 1998. Nevertheless, it is

doubtful that all PLA units complied. Even the conservative *Shidai Chao*, a magazine published by the official *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), suggested in 1999 that 10 percent of the PLA businesses had failed to divest themselves completely (qtd. Shambaugh 203). Moreover, the PLA continues to be plagued by the enormous debt accumulated by unsuccessful PLA businesses.

As Chinese leaders aspire to modernize the PLA, they face several impediments. First, it is unlikely that the current economic growth, fueled by liberalization and privatization, would result in increased military spending. Second, even if the PLA were to receive increased funding, its internal organization lacks the discipline necessary to utilize the increased budget efficiently. In short, reform of such fundamental problems “may require nothing short of a major transformation of the political system” (Shambaugh 250). As Paul Dibb and colleagues argue, RMA will therefore “continue to favor heavily American military predominance. It is not likely that China will, in any meaningful way, close the RMA gap with the US” (11). China is not a military superpower, and it will not become one in the conceivable future despite its impressive economic growth.

CHINA AS A REGIONAL POWER

The United States' national security interests today extend well beyond the protection of its homeland. In *A Grand Strategy for America*, Robert J. Art ranks “deep peace among the Eurasian great powers” as an American national interest whose order of priority is second only to the clearly most critical “defense of the homeland” (46). Nye ranks “maintaining the balance of power in important regions” as first on his list titled *A Strategy Based on Global Public Goods* (147). Finally, Bernstein and Munro argue that one of the key objectives for the United States is “preventing any single country from gaining overwhelming power in Asia” (21). If Chinese leaders choose to use its military power to disrupt the security environment in East Asia, their action will have consequences on American interests.

Although China is far from achieving superpower status, it is certainly a considerable regional power in East Asia. China possesses sufficient military capabilities to project its powers in the region and cause disruption in the local security environment. As Betts and Christensen point out, for example, “the PLA does not have the American army's logistical capability, but even a half century ago it managed to project a force of hundreds of thousands of men deep into Korea” (20). Moreover, as Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro argue, “driven by nationalist sentiments, a yearning to redeem the humiliations of the past, and the simple urge for international

power, China is seeking to replace the United States as the dominant power in Asia" (19).

A likely source to prompt China's military action is its outstanding territorial disputes with its East Asian neighbors including Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, and Taiwan, the latter of which China regards as an internal, as opposed to an international, issue. A Chinese conflict with Vietnam or the Philippines would constitute what Art calls a "non-great-power war," because it involves a great power (China) against a non-great power (Vietnam or the Philippines) (55). As Art argues, "the United States has little interest in preventing these non-great power wars in Eurasia and should stay out of them to the extent possible" (55). This is true even if China were to succeed in taking the disputed territories by force. Today, "conquest of large amounts of Eurasian territory per se no longer constitutes a security threat to the United States ... the additional resources gained thereby would not add significantly to [the conqueror's] ability to harm the United States" (Art 57). A Sino-Japanese conflict over the Senkaku Islands, on the other hand, would constitute a great-power war. It is difficult, however, to imagine the two states going to war over "rocks that cannot sustain human habitation" (Charney 863). Moreover, Beijing is likely to refrain from a Sino-Japanese conflict, as it would inevitably arouse Chinese nationalism because of the history of constant Japanese invasions from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of World War II. During the row with Japan over the Senkaku Islands in 1996, Beijing prevented protestors from marching into the Japanese embassy (Betts and Christensen 24). According to one Chinese foreign affairs expert, this reflects Beijing's fear of its inability to control nationalism:

If the Party allowed the people to protest unhindered, the first day they would be protesting against Japan, the next day against the lack of response by the government, and on the third day against the government itself (qtd. in Betts and Christensen 25).

This leaves Taiwan as the one issue for which the United States must articulate its position because an armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait would necessarily involve the United States.

THE TAIWAN QUESTION

The American position on Taiwan is embodied in the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which was approved by the 96th Congress in 1979. The two key points of the TRA are as follows: First, the United States consid-

ers “any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States,” and second, the United States will “maintain the capacity ... to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan,” and “to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character” to that end (*The Taiwan*).

By its commitment, the United States risks an armed conflict with China, whose interest in Taiwan is likely to persist for two reasons. First, reunification is a nationalistic goal that reflects Beijing’s intent to conclude the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party. A Chinese foreign affairs specialist in Beijing is quoted as having said in 1997: “In the Chinese value system, sovereignty, national unification, and preserving the regime have always been higher than peace,” and that “historically, Chinese leaders have believed in force. Force worked in Tiananmen. It intimidated the intellectuals, and that paved the way for economic growth and political stability. It is “realpolitik” (qtd. in Bernstein and Munro 30). This view suggests that China will never relinquish its intention to control Taiwan and that it will act militarily towards Taiwan if provoked to do so.

The second reason is a strategic one. According to Bernstein and Munro, “there are signs in articles and statements from Beijing that China increasingly views Taiwan as a strategic prize,” which would give them, for example, control over two southern approaches to Japan, the Taiwan and Luzon Straits (Bernstein and Munro 30). Furthermore, China fears that if it fails to reincorporate Taiwan, an adversary that is friendly to Taiwan could use the island to threaten Chinese national security (Shambaugh 300). In this sense, Taiwan is of geopolitical significance for China in a way that Cuba was significant for the United States during the Cold War.

TAIPEI’S PROVOCATION

Despite its hard rhetoric, Beijing for the present is unlikely to make an aggressive move unless provoked to do so. Contrary to popular beliefs, China’s stated goal is not the occupation and direct control of Taiwan. Michael Swaine, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, testified to the House Committee on International Relations that “China remains committed to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan situation as a first priority. Chinese military deployments are intended primarily to deter the attainment by Taiwan of *de jure* independence, not to prepare for an inevitable war” (*The Taiwan*). Robert S. Ross concurs, arguing,

“China’s intent is not to compel Taiwan to expedite the pace of the formal reunification, but to deter Taipei and Washington from changing the status quo” (41). Although clearly not satisfied with the present situation, Beijing finds the status quo acceptable. What is not acceptable is the likely cost associated with a provocative action in the Taiwan Strait. As evident in its recent efforts to coordinate the six-nation talks with North Korea, China is interested in gaining international recognition as an equal partner at negotiation tables. China would lose such credibility if it were to act aggressively in the Strait.

The threat today comes from Taipei, the party most dissatisfied with the status quo, which is also gaining more confidence and military power. Throughout its volatile relationship with the mainland, Taiwan’s military preparation has been defensive, as opposed to offensive, in nature. Rather than actively building up its military with the goal of attacking the mainland or annihilating the PLA, Taiwan has aimed to deter a Chinese offensive and to defend the main island of Taiwan, its offshore islands, airspace, and surrounding seas. As Commandant Xu Bosheng of Taiwan’s Joint Forces War College said in 1995, Taiwan “[does] not want war but [is] prepared to prevent an invasion ... [Taiwan’s] deterrent is based not only on fighting as best as possible to protect the country, but also in making the PRC pay too high a price” (qtd. in Shambaugh 319). Such defensive attitude on Taipei’s part is the basic assumption behind the TRA, which anticipates the Chinese aggression on Taiwan, not vice versa.

The situation in Taiwan has changed, such that it boasts a stable government, a prosperous economy, and a vastly improved military (Swaine). With these developments, the attitude of the Taiwanese government and public has also shown signs of change, especially since the late 1990s. Earlier in 2004, the democratic Taiwan reelected its independence-minded president, Chen Shui-bian. In October 2004, Taiwan’s prime minister, Yu Shyi-kun, abandoned the official line that Taipei seeks only defensive military strategies. For the first time, Yu suggested in public that Taiwan should consider building a missile force with the aim of establishing a “balance of terror” to fend off China’s threats (“Tit for Tat”). In an openly aggressive comment, Yu said: “If you fire 100 missiles at me, I should be able to fire 100 missiles at you, or at least 50 ... If you strike Taipei and Kaohsiung, I should at least be able to strike Shanghai” (“Tit for Tat”). Although Taiwan has yet to acquire such capabilities, *Liberty Times*, a Taiwanese newspaper, recently reported that the armed forces has tested new cruise-type missiles with a range of at least 90 miles (“Tit for Tat”). Such missiles, if mounted on ships with upgraded guidance systems, could hit targets in several Chinese cities. Neither Washington nor Beijing has firm control over develop-

ments in Taiwan. This, argue Betts and Christensen, “is a classic recipe for surprise, miscalculation and uncontrolled escalation” (26).

That China will not hesitate to react with force in the event of a Taiwanese unilateral action can be inferred from the PLA’s buildup in the recent years. China has been purchasing high-tech systems—including aircraft, submarines and destroyers—from both Russia and Israel. Shambaugh argues that such acquisitions are not simply a part of the larger program of modernization, but constitute a contingency-driven plan that would allow China to present a credible threat to Taiwan by 2007 (283). Since the mid 1990s, the PLA has also been conducting exercises that simulate the landing and seizure of Taiwan. Additionally, China has placed particular emphasis on improving electronic countermeasures (ECM) and information warfare (IW), which suggests that it anticipates involvement by American aircraft carrier battle groups in the event of a Taiwan conflict. Finally, the US Pacific Command estimated in 2001 that approximately 300 DF-15 ballistic missiles were targeted at Taiwan from the mainland, and that this number may be increasing at the rate of 50 per year (Shambaugh 280).

Chinese leaders confirm their preparedness. A senior colonel in the Institute of Strategic Studies of the National Defense University warned that “if force is used to reunify [with Taiwan], we must be prepared for war with the United States. If the United States wants to intervene, you are welcome!” (qtd. in Shambaugh 300). In another account, Senior Colonel Luo Yuan, deputy director of Academy of Military Sciences Strategy Department, observed: “We are fully ready to fight a tough war ... We will not stop until we accomplish our goal. If the first attack is unsuccessful, we will undertake another one and another one until complete victory” (qtd. in Shambaugh 309). Nor can such rhetoric be dismissed as bluffs. As Swaine points out in his testimony, in the event of a failed deterrence, Chinese leaders:

will almost certainly fight, to ensure their respect among their colleagues and the Chinese populace, and to defend the legitimacy and stability of their government. Moreover, China’s leaders would likely fight even if they stood a good chance of losing in the initial rounds. For them, to not fight would mean a certain loss of power; to fight and lose would probably mean that they would survive politically to fight another day (*The Taiwan*).

If provoked, the cost of inaction is much too high for the Chinese leaders not to fight even in the event of an American intervention.

AMERICAN POLICY IMPLICATIONS

If conflict does erupt in the Taiwan Strait, the United States would have to intervene or “lose forever its claim to be the great guarantor of stability in the Asia-Pacific region” (Bernstein and Munro 30). But a war with China over Taiwan is one that is extremely difficult for the United States to win in a satisfactory way. The question of whether China has adequate military power to conquer the island is insignificant because “sinking the Chinese navy and defeating an invasion attempt against the island would not be the end of the story” (Betts and Christensen 27). Since Taiwan will always be just 100 miles from mainland China, the US can terminate such a war in victory only with the complete independence of Taiwan (Betts and Christensen 28). To achieve that goal would involve a lengthy and costly war against a nuclear state with a population of over a billion. Any outcome short of a Taiwanese independence would constitute a Chinese victory since China’s stated goal is not complete reunification, as argued above.

Despite such unfavorable security climate, Washington’s signals towards Beijing and Taipei are not as clear as they can be. To be sure, the United States was rightly critical of Chen’s tough campaign rhetoric. Yet such warnings against provocation are mixed with contradictory signals, including President George W. Bush’s comment in an April 2001 interview that the United States “would do whatever it takes to help Taiwan defend itself” (qtd. in Shambaugh 327). Such remarks have led Chinese leaders to conclude that Chen’s government is being encouraged by Washington to move towards independence (Tompkins). Considering the nature of the Taiwan conflict, the United States must send a more precise signal in order to deter both sides from acting aggressively. To Beijing, Washington must articulate its defensive commitment to Taiwan in order to deter Chinese aggression but it must also clarify that the US will not use its military capabilities to encourage or facilitate Taiwanese independence. To Taipei, Washington must clarify the extent and the exact circumstances under which the United States would intervene militarily. Specifically, Washington should use its military force—whether by aiding the Taiwanese forces or by direct intervention—in the event of a Chinese attack, but only to restore the status quo, rather than to give Taiwan independence. Clear articulation of its position would also allow the US to minimize the loss of credibility in the event of an armed conflict.

CONCLUSION

As China rapidly emerges as a significant political and economic player, it will occupy an increasingly important role militarily. At present, the PLA is riddled with internal problems and is in no position to challenge the United States' military. The current economic growth driven by decentralization is unlikely to translate directly into the modernization of the PLA, however, there are certain indicators that the PLA is moving towards an elite military. Most importantly, Chinese leaders are acknowledging their deficiencies and striving for modernization. Recent developments like the EU's probable decision to lift the arms embargo are sure to facilitate this process. Moreover, China's military presence is becoming strategically important for Washington, as evident in China's recent role in war on terrorism and in particular, the six-nation talks with North Korea.

Nevertheless, China remains skeptical and even cynical of American military power. Some Chinese analysts have argued that the American armed forces is often overstretched and that the PLA could cause significant damage if it attacked while the United States is fighting another war (Shambaugh 298). In such political climate, the United States must strengthen its military relationship with China by truly embracing its emergence as a regional military power. To do so, Washington must send clearer signals to Beijing, especially on such volatile issues like that of nuclear policy and Taiwan. Specifically, the US should engage Beijing in a critical dialogue about the missile defense program and articulate its position on Taiwan to both Beijing and Taipei. China is not a superpower but is rapidly emerging as a significant actor. The United States can establish a beneficial relationship with China if it is sensitive to China's perception of the world.

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