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The Impact of the Modernizing People's Liberation Army (PLA) on East Asian Nations

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The defense budget of the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the year 1993 was announced by Beijing as representing an increase of approximately 18 percent over that for 1992, the major recipient being personnel salary increases and to fight inflation.¹ This was the first in double-digit increases that have occurred since that year; the defense budget for 2011 is estimated by the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) as 12.7 percent higher than that for 2010, with an average annual increase of 12.1 percent “for the past twenty years.”² That these numbers are approximate due to the different computation methods used by China and the United States does not mitigate the fact of the continuous, dramatic increases in defense spending by the former.

This stream of defense budget increases has allowed a dramatic modernization of the PLA and increase in its capabilities, especially for the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and PLA Navy (PLAN). This phenomenon arguably is not surprising for a nation experiencing China's record-setting economic expansion and reemergence as a world power, but has changed—and continues to change—the strategic environment in East Asia. This paper will examine China's military modernization and its apparent effects on the strategic self-consciousness of neighboring countries, especially Russia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the nations of Southeast Asia, and India.

China's 21st Century Military

Modernization of China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has in effect been ongoing since the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the Republic of China's (ROC) forces in 1949. For personnel, the huge army of that time, almost completely limited to

¹ Author's conversation with senior PLA officers in Beijing, January 1994. PLA officer salaries reportedly doubled with this budget increase; a similar increase occurred for U.S. military officers in 1974, with the end of the draft and institution of the “all-volunteer” military.

² *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the PRC* (Washington, DC: OSD, 2011): 41.

ground forces, almost immediately began decreasing in numbers, from more than five million to its present 2.3 million personnel.³

Russia

No nation has had more impact on the PLA, or suffered from that military, than Russia. For equipment, the PLA in 1949 was primarily an infantry force, albeit equipped with some artillery and armor units. Air Force and naval forces were practically non-existent; improving relations with the Soviet Union, 1948-1959, resulted in significant improvement in China's military, especially for the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and navy (PLAN). These nascent services relied almost entirely on Soviet equipment and advisors, the latter serving as instructors but also supervising establishment of the various service schools that China established to educate and train its "new" military personnel.

Soviet assistance mostly ended in 1960 when Moscow broke with Beijing; the two countries were in a minor war by 1969. Today, a friendly relationship has been reestablished, albeit one based more on economics and trade than on military exchanges and assistance. Significant equipment has been sold to Beijing by Moscow in the past decade, however, despite apparent misgivings by some senior Russian military commanders.⁴ These equipment sales, although mostly in hiatus since the end of 2007, appear to have benefited China's navy and air force more than they have the army.

The PLAAF has acquired Soviet/Russian designed and produced Su-27 and Su-30 fighter and attack aircraft, the only Fourth Generation tactical aircraft in China's inventory. The PLAAF's transport, air-to-air refueling, and Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft almost all utilize the Il-76/78 airframe. At a lesser level, China's curious inability to design and build a successful gas turbine engine—either for airborne or seaborne use—has led to continued purchases of foreign engines, from Great Britain, the United States (although not since 1989), Ukraine, and Russia. Indeed, it is Chinese reverse engineering of Russian engines, counter to their agreement, that has contributed to Russian military resentment of Beijing's activities.

The PLAN since the mid-1990s has acquired four *Sovremenny*-class guided-missile destroyers and twelve *Kilo*-class conventionally powered submarines from Russia.⁵ The former's most valuable transfer of military technology is its SSN-22 "Sunburn" anti-ship cruise missile and supporting system, designed by the Soviet Union as a counter to U.S. aircraft carrier and escorting cruisers armed with the Aegis anti-air warfare (AAW) missile system. The *Kilo*-class submarines provided China with much of the military technology to modernize its indigenously produced submarine fleet, the most recent units of which are the thirteen *Song*- and eight *Yuan*-

³ These are "soft" numbers: the number of troops in the PLA in 1949 probably was imprecise even to its commanders; today, the PLA includes some number of its civilian employees—who wear uniform—but not the People's Armed Police (PAP), militia, or the Coast Guard and associated organizations.

⁴ See, for instance, Oleg Odnokolenko: "Watch Out, Market Closing....," *Moscow Itogi* (04 February 2003), in: OSC-CEP20030204000434 (accessed 28 September 2011).

⁵ Equipment and systems names are those assigned by NATO.

class boats that form Beijing's primary naval weapon against possible U.S. intervention in a scenario involving the use of Chinese military force to counter a Taiwan declaration of independence or similar move by Taipei.

More difficult to identify and impossible to quantify are additional areas of assistance provided to Chinese military modernization by engineers and designers left without employment by the radically reduced Russian military and defense industries. The newest Chinese aircraft and naval platforms are so like earlier Soviet/Russian models as to leave little doubt that Russian personnel have been involved in their design. The Chinese J-20 aircraft, and the *Jin*- and *Shang*-class nuclear powered submarines are prime examples. The J-20 looks like the Russian T-50 stealth aircraft, while the *Jin* and *Shang* closely resemble Soviet Delta-IV and Victor-III submarines.

Another very significant transfer to China of Soviet/Russian technology is AAW systems, including the S300 and S400 missile systems. These provide China with the ability to monitor effectively the airspace over both the Taiwan Strait and the island itself.

The effect in Moscow of China's modernizing military is difficult to discern precisely. Anecdotal information and open source reporting indicates that different views prevail. Economic and business interests no doubt favor the closer rapport with Beijing, disregarding the military aspect of the relationship, while Russian military commanders apparently view with concern both China's increasing military capability and the resulting bilateral imbalance, particularly in the Siberian theater. Another concern that may well underlay Russian civilian leaders' view of China's increasingly powerful military is the dramatic lack of population and societal strength in Russia's Far East, especially as compared to China's population and burgeoning economy just south of the Amur River.

Japan

Japan's relationship with China is much more straightforward than Russia's, affected primarily by a long history of mutual enmity, ameliorated by a recent, mutually beneficial economic relationship. Within this framework, Tokyo is seriously concerned about Beijing's military modernization. First is concern about disputes in the East China Sea. The first of these is about the sovereignty of the seven islands—really little more than rocks—that Japan calls the Senkaku and China calls the Diaoyu Islands. The sovereignty question is complicated by Washington's statements that, while the United States does not take a position on the sovereignty of these islands, they do fall under the Mutual Defense Treaty with Japan.

The second dispute concerns energy deposits in the seabed. Both Beijing and Tokyo claim much of these reserves, particularly those in the Chun Xiao field. Both nations claim this area as part of their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), both are employing naval and air forces to enforce their claims. China has repeatedly deployed its most modern submarines and surface warships in transits through the disputed areas.

Hence, Japan's national command authority, its civilian and military leaders, are directly concerned about the increasingly capable military forces that Beijing is employing in the East

China Sea and in other maritime areas surrounding Japan. The advent of China's first aircraft carrier and near-term deployment of its first stealth fighter will increase Japan's concerns.

Another area of Japanese concern is China's extensive cruise and ballistic missile inventory, which is expanding in size and improving in capability. Tokyo's defense treaty with Washington, and concern about the fate of Taiwan, which many Japanese analysts consider their nation's vital strategic interest, lead to worry about Beijing's threats to use military force against Taiwan if various "red lines" are crossed. Chinese military authors have hinted that in the event of such a clash, in which U.S. intervention is expected, that missiles and other weapons systems might be employed against U.S. military bases in East Asia, including those in Japan.

Republic of Korea (ROK)

South Korea also has sovereignty disputes with China, but of a much less serious nature than Japan. Seoul and Beijing disagree about the limits of their Continental Shelves and also about fishery catches, but neither of these apparently is considered to be a national interest serious enough to make attractive use of military force. A more disruptive factor in South Korea's relationship with China, in fact, is the latter's refusal to condemn recent incidents of blatant North Korean aggression.

The ROK is also in the process of a long-term modernization of its military, especially its navy, but this is likely in response primarily to threats from the north, secondarily because of a generally hostile attitude toward Japan, based on both history and the dispute with Japan over Tok Do/Takeshima, and only thirdly—and a long way third—because of Chinese military modernization. Furthermore, any ROK security concerns are couched in the comforting environment of its mutual security treaty with the United States.

Taiwan

Taiwan is not a widely recognized nation, of course—only twenty-three countries recognize Taipei rather than Beijing as the capital of "China"—but obviously no other political entity is more concerned about Chinese military modernization. There is no military "balance" across the strait between Taiwan and China; the PLA has been capable of dominating that narrow stretch of water, and the airspace above it, since approximately 2005.

Taiwan military modernization has been dramatically understated during the period of PLA modernization; since 2000, Taipei has simply placed domestic economic and social priorities above those related to defense modernization. Improvements in the Taiwan military have certainly occurred, particularly with respect to equipment acquisitions from the United States, but no real effort has been made by either political party to modernize that military to the point of establishing a "fortress Taiwan."

Meanwhile, Beijing has engaged in a process of military modernization clearly aimed, as the number one priority (apart from homeland defense), at deterring Taipei from declaring *de jure* independence or crossing various other "red lines." The most important element of PLA modernization to deter Taipei is the construction of more than thirty submarines during the past

decade; the growth of the PLAN's submarine force clearly is aimed at deterring not Taiwan, *per se*, but intended to deter, slow, or even defeat U.S. intervention in support of Taipei in the event that Beijing chooses to use military force against the island.

The second most important element of China's military modernization from Taiwan's perspective is the ability of the PLANAF, because of its acquisition of fourth generation tactical aircraft, especially the Su-27 and Su-30, and state-of-the-art AAW missile systems, to gain and maintain control of the air over both the strait and island of Taiwan.

The third most important element of mainland military modernization serves more of a deterrent than a potentially destructive role. Beijing's thousand or more short and medium range ballistic missiles stationed within range of Taiwan send a powerful message to the island's people. One developing weapon in China's missile arsenal is intended to strike not Taiwan, but U.S. aircraft carriers which might be steaming to the island's assistance: the anti-ship ballistic missile, based on the CSS-5, poses a serious threat to those carriers.

In sum, Taiwan is directly and existentially threatened by China's military modernization. Only massive, prolonged U.S. intervention would prevent Beijing from delivering widespread devastation on Taiwan.

India

Indian defense analysts are very concerned about Chinese military modernization. While New Delhi's list of national security threats begins with and is overwhelmingly weighted toward Pakistan, it views Beijing as a threat of consequence. The only active sovereignty dispute between the two nations is a relatively small part of their border, over which a brief war was fought in 1962. Periodic negotiations have failed to resolve this dispute.

A more recent Indian concern has emerged as a direct result of China's military modernization, particularly in the PLAN and Second Artillery. India's concern is based both on China's close economic and military relationship with Pakistan and on India's concern for its ability to control the Indian Ocean in the face of dramatically increased Chinese economic and political influence and presence in the region, supported by the modernizing PLAN.

Underlying these concerns is the general economic development programs of the two Asian giants, with China apparently outstripping India, at least in the first half of the twenty-first century. This, in turn, involves a competitive search for energy resources, which ties directly to the ongoing modernization of both the PLAN and the Indian Navy, with a nascent contest for control of the SLOCs that carry vital energy supplies across the Indian Ocean from Middle Eastern and Southwest Asian fields.

The Indian Navy's modernization during the past decade has been significant, headlined by new aircraft carriers, nuclear powered submarines, and ballistic missiles, but neither as dramatic nor focused as has China's. The latter's military modernization strikes at the heart of India's concerns over Chinese military assistance to Pakistan, improved missile capability against India, and especially the nascent challenge posed to Indian domination of the ocean bearing its name.

Southeast Asia

This sub-region lies in China's backyard, but its member states are varied in every respect—economy, population, political system, military strength, and perhaps most importantly their relationship with their giant neighbor to the north. Beijing's military modernization hence has not affected all Southeast Asian nations in the same way, but it is recognized by all.

Some are alarmed by an increased military capability they view as directly threatening national security concerns. Heading this list is Vietnam, which fought a war in 1979 with its erstwhile ally but historic enemy, and which today confronts China over conflicting sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. The increase in China's surface and subsurface fleet are of particular concern; in response, Hanoi is engaging modernization of its own military, but in a very targeted way. First is investment in its submarine force, with the purchase of Kilo-class submarines from Russia. Submarines offer the most efficient way to minimize investment in naval forces while obtaining the maximum effect.

Second is Hanoi's acquisition of fourth generation tactical aircraft, again from Russia. This also reflects concern about Beijing's improving military's ability to dominate the South China Sea, where the two nations confront each other over sovereignty claims.

Joining Vietnam in Southeast Asia as "most concerned" about China's military modernization is the Republic of the Philippines. The Philippines also confronts China over conflicting sovereignty claim in the South China Sea, but unlike Hanoi, Manila has not been able to conduct a meaningful military modernization campaign. Hence, its concerns about PLA modernization are limited almost entirely to protests and diplomatic efforts aimed at pretending China's military capabilities are not improving.

The same is not true of other nations of this region, however, as Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand are moving to improve their military capabilities in the face of China's modernization and increasingly forward actions in support of its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. All four of these nations are in effect following Vietnam's lead, acquiring submarines and new combat aircraft. They are also modernizing their small surface fleets through acquisition of anti-ship cruise missiles.

None of the Southeast Asian nations are attempting to match China's military modernization, or even reaching to defeat the PLA. Rather, the focus on acquiring small numbers of submarines, modern aircraft, and cruise missiles seem to reflect a policy of deterrence, of deploying enough capable naval and air force to make Chinese employment of military force too costly to be an attractive policy option.

These nations are, to varying degrees, alarmed enough about potential application of the military-to-military force by Beijing, that they are devoting national resources to establish what they hope will be national militaries strong enough to deter China from such a course of action.

Conclusion

The modernization of China's military should not surprise observers. Any nation in history reaping the benefits of such dramatic economic progress has invested in an improved military. Spain in the sixteenth; Great Britain in the eighteenth; France in the nineteenth; the United States, Germany, and Japan in the twentieth century have all devoted considerable national treasure to modernizing their militaries, with navies perhaps being the principle beneficiary in each case.

China's modernization of the PLA has been so dramatic, however, that it has changed the balance of military power in Asia. Little more than twenty years of explosive economic growth, annual double-digit increases to the Chinese defense budget, and last year's clumsily arrogant actions by Beijing in the East and South China Seas have all contributed to fear and counter-modernization by the nations of East Asia.

These events—China's military modernization and its effects on Asian security—directly affect the United States. U.S. security interests in Asia are embodied in mutual defense treaties with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia; the equivalent treaty structure exists with Thailand. Additionally, the Taiwan Relations Act places a special burden on the United States concerning the defense of that island, while special defense relationships exist with New Zealand and Singapore. China's increasingly capable military is perceived as an uncertain factor at best, and a definite threat at worst by all these nations. Hence, Washington's efforts concurrently to engage fully with China and to encourage Beijing to become a responsible member of the international community must be balanced by continued reinforcing of long-standing and vital U.S. relations with the other nations of the region.

Dr. Bernard Cole is a Professor at the National Defense University (NDU). He has written a number of articles and six books on China and the People's Liberation Army and Navy. In particular, the second edition of his book titled The Great Wall at Sea (Naval Institute Press: 2010) is the acclaimed English language resource on China's naval strategy and capabilities. Prior to his position at NDU, Dr. Cole served over 30 years as Surface Warfare Officer in the Navy, and commanded the USS Rathburne and Destroyer Squadron 35.