

China's Military Rise and Its Implications for the ROK-U.S. Alliance (A Discussion Paper)

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Since the 1980s and continuing to date China's rise in wealth and influence has been a topical issue in Asia and beyond. China's high-level economic growth for three decades, coupled with such well-publicized developments as double-digit defense budget increases, the acquisition of advanced weapons from abroad, and sovereignty claims over Taiwan and the South China Sea, has all contributed to the widespread perception that the future of Asian security and prosperity will increasingly hinge upon the capability and behavior of China.

While it may be true that the rise of China is a world-historic phenomenon that shapes the world's geopolitical landscape in the 21st century, the debate has so far revolved around two key questions: What are its economic, diplomatic, and military implications and how best other countries can cope with it, individually or collectively? In relative terms, moreover, the foremost attention was given to China's economic rise rather than its other—let alone military—dimensions.

South Korea (or ROK) is no exception to this rule. Notwithstanding their deepening ties and frequent contacts since 1992, the ROK and China have put an uneven emphasis on economic and socio-cultural relations. In the political and diplomatic fronts their interests often diverge from each other—as vividly shown in the case of the *Cheonan* sinking, and for its part China pretends to appear nonchalant to such sensitive yet important issues as a North Korean contingency, the history of Koguryo, and North Korean residents in China. The security implications of China's military rise are rarely discussed in Seoul and draw little attention from both the elite and public.

This brief essay highlights the select aspects of China's force modernization and its implications for regional and peninsular security. An adequate analysis of PLA modernization should include, but is not limited to, its evolving military strategy, defense budget, hardware acquisition, defense industry, and training. As this is capably done elsewhere,¹ only the most recent and salient aspects that touch upon regional security will

¹ For a recent and comprehensive assessment of PLA modernization, see Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, eds., *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, June 2010). For China's own assessment, see Jiang Tingyu, ed., *Kua shiji de huihuang: Gaige kaifang sanshi nian de*

be discussed here. Included in the rest of the paper are the nature and patterns of PLA force modernization since 1985, their meaning for regional and peninsular security, and policy recommendations for the ROK and its alliance with the United States.

Patterns of PLA Force Modernization, 1985-2010

China's defense modernization began in earnest in 1985, when the enlarged CMC decided to take the "strategic transformation" (*zhanlue zhuanbian*) and adopted the military strategy of "limited local war" (*youxian jubu zhanzheng*). Since that time on, the PLA has gradually but considerably improved its fighting capability over some 25 years through its across-the-board defense modernization. For an analytical simplicity it can be divided into two distinct periods: 1985-1999 and 2000-2010.

From 1985 to around 1999: "Peripheral Defense" and Select Modernization

Even if the new strategy called for an overhaul of its antiquated force, China faced a combination of financial, organizational, and operational constraints and therefore pursued a low-cost, gradual approach. Beginning with the manpower reduction of one-million personnel in 1985-87, the PLA streamlined its organizations and military regions (MRs), strengthened education and training, and procured a few select weapons systems at home and from abroad. An emphasis was given to naval and air power as well as to missile force which necessitated the acquisitions of such hardware as EW equipment, naval/air assets, and SAM.

A slow yet steady progress for about 15 years in a wide array of areas such as organization, equipment, and exercise notwithstanding, a glaring weakness existed as to military technological backwardness, outmoded and obsolescent weapons systems, inadequate number of high-tech systems, and a lack of realistic training. The post-Tiananmen western embargoes as well as Sino-Soviet/Russian rapprochement (in particular, the decline of Russian power) allowed PLA leaders to seek from Russia high-tech weapons and technologies. Parenthetically, the 1995-96 crisis in the Taiwan Strait and the subsequent U.S. military involvement further reinforced China's military-equipment dependence on Russia.

Throughout the 1990s China gradually increased the scope and level of weapons and technologies imported from Russia. Its acquisition patterns tell, among others, its continuing deficiencies, its likely future military requirements, and direction of PLA and defense-industrial modernization. Included in Russia's actual arms transfers to China were fourth-generation aircraft (e.g., Su-27SK and Su-30MKK) and their associated components (i.e., AA-8/10/11 missiles, AL-31F engines, and *Zhuk* radar); SAMs (S-300PMU/SA-10); naval platforms (*Kilo*-class submarine and *Sovremenny*-class destroyer); and some land assets (BMP APCs and T-72 MBTs). The total value of transfers in this decade is estimated to be eight billion dollars—that is, an average one billion dollars per year. For its part, China intended to minimize the off-the-shelf purchase of weapons and maximize the introduction of new technologies so as to enhance

Zhongguo guofang he jundui jianshe [Cross-century Glory: China's Defense and Army Building for the 30-year Reform and Opening (Period)](Beijing: Dangjianduwu chubanshe, December 2008).

the domestic defense-industrial capability in preparation for future warfare as well as for further defense modernization.

From 2000 to Present: A New Pattern in Wider Areas

Since around 2000 a new and wide-ranging pattern in PLA force modernization has been observable from outside. They include, but are not limited to, a) the production and deployment of new weapons systems; b) introduction of more and better weapons systems from abroad, particularly from Russia; c) enhanced rapid reaction capability (RRF); d) a steady increase in I/W, I/O and EW capability; e) improved integrated logistics system (ILS); f) widespread “joint” MR training and exercises; and g) production and deployment of a variety of missile systems.

China’s import of Russian weapons and technologies, for instance, jumped to two billion dollars from the previous one billion dollars per year. In addition to new hardware (such as the naval Su-30MK2, Il-76 [for transport and AWACS], and Il-78 [for mid-air refueling]), their technological cooperation includes parts, design, R&D, and operational know-how. It is in this context that China became the world’s largest importer of major conventional weapons in the period from 2001 to 2008.² China’s “indigenous” development of HQ-9 and FT-2000 SAMs may also have been aided by the import of a whopping 994 S-300PMU/SA-10 missiles and its related technologies by 2006.³

A new pattern of PLA force build-up is believed to be based upon several causes and backgrounds. First of all, it is a logical outcome of consistent investment on force modernization. Defense budget increases for 22 years in a row (1989-2010) is a case in point, which is tantamount to an average 16 percent increase per annum. Second, domestic R&D on new weapons as well as foreign acquisitions seemed to have synergistic effects on the improvement and development of Chinese weapons systems. Third, in the 1999-2000 period Chinese leaders and strategists made a strategic reassessment in light of such negative trends as the “mistaken” bombing on China’s embassy in Belgrade, the release of the Cox report, and Lee Teng-hui’s “Two-Country” statement. They all point to an urgent need to bolster its defense preparation. Fourth but not the last, the new pattern has become possible due to a success in a series of defense-industrial reform measures which began in 1998-99. In April 1998 the General Armament Department (GAD) was created, and the COSTIND has since 2000 managed the newly-reconstituted 11 defense groups on astronautics, nuclear, aerospace, shipbuilding, ordnance, and electronics. According to General Li Jinai, then GAD chief, “[T]here has been a marked improvement in national defense scientific research and in building of weapons and equipment. The past five years [i.e., 1998-2002] has been the best period of development in the country’s history.⁴ Besides, the proportion of military

² See *SIPRI Yearbook 2009*, p. 326.

³ U.S. Office of Secretary of Defense, *Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2006* (Washington, DC: Office of Secretary of Defense, 2006), p. 21 and the author’s estimates.

⁴ Originally appeared in *Jiefangjun Bao*, March 8, 2003, p. 1; as cited in “Chinese Defence Industry: Chinese Puzzle,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, January 14, 2004 and Keith Crane *et al.*, *Modernizing China’s Military: Opportunities and Constraints* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2005), p. 136.

goods in defense industry's total output is now believed to be 30 percent, a figure Chinese leaders want to increase to over 70 percent by 2020.

It is thus not surprising to note that China's acquisition of Russian weapons and technologies has been the most important source for PLA's new "indigenous" weapons and force modernization as well as by extension for its military capability.⁵ The current and likely future acquisition processes invariably point to a continued acquisition of Sukhoi (Su) family aircraft, J-11A/B (China's licensed product of Su-27SK), and J-10 (China's domestically developed combat aircraft); KJ-2000/KJ-200 AWACS; Ilyushin (Il) series transport (76) and tanker (78) aircraft and its domestic variants (Y-20); and engines (WS-10), radar, design, and avionics. There also is a whole range of new air-to-air and air-to-surface missiles.⁶ In brief, it is highly likely that the thrust of future PLA modernization—at least until 2020—would very much follow the course identified in the first decade of the 21st century.⁷

Regional and Peninsular Implications

In assessing the regional implications of PLA force modernization, it is very important not to "overestimate" or "underestimate" China's actual military capability; as Thomas Christensen has reminded us, a war (in the Taiwan Strait) is most likely when China overestimates and other countries underestimate the former's military capability. Moreover, it is not China's defense modernization per se, but its actual and perceived capability to project power along and beyond its borders that has a direct bearing on achieving its foreign policy goals and arouses concerns over its capability and intention to destabilize regional security.

Implications for Regional Security

Probably the most consequential aspect of China's "military rise" will be a change in the regional structure of power in which the U.S. maintains the leading and stabilizing role, a host of bilateral alliance and defense ties, and a set of economic and security objectives. In post-Cold War East Asia China's rise has been a "strategic reality" to the U.S. and regional countries in their economic and diplomatic activities. Due also to the nature of the Chinese political system and its continued involvement in the region's territorial and maritime dispute, it stands to reason that its neighboring countries are concerned about how China would use its new power and influence.

China's increasing military power should be seen in this context. According to Jonathan D. Pollack, a noted scholar on the Chinese and Asian security environment, China is likely to acquire the following military capabilities by 2015: a) sea denial capability near

⁵ For a succinct and balanced assessment of Russia's role in China's force modernization, see *SIPRI Yearbook 2009*, pp. 308-10. This author, on the other hand, has long argued for a distinction between a fighting capability and force modernization. They are simply different concepts with each other.

⁶ For a comprehensive assessment of the current status of PLAAF modernization, see Craig Caffrey, "China's Military Aircraft: Up and Coming," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, July 5, 2010; Kenny Fuchter, "Air Power and China in the 21st Century," *Air Power Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Winter 2008), pp. 1-17.

⁷ It should be noted, however, that the so-called "non-equipment" aspects of PLA modernization such as leadership, C4ISR, NCW, and joint exercises have not been addressed in this brief paper.

China's waters; b) sustained air superiority near China's land borders; c) a capability to threaten U.S. regional bases by long-range assets; d) a challenge to U.S. information superiority; and e) strategic nuclear threat capability against U.S. homeland.⁸ These projections will become a dawning reality especially when the PLA moves from the existing theater-level war-fighting capability to a more extensive and sustained campaign-level one.

Even by 2020 or after China is unlikely to compete with the U.S. militarily in regions other than East Asia. For now and for the foreseeable future, the PLA navy would continue to pursue the twin goals of preparing for a Taiwan contingency and of building a truly regional navy. At the heart of the Taiwan contingency preparations is the PLA's "anti-access strategy,"⁹ which aims at the approaching U.S. naval and air power in a crisis. China's attempts to "deter, delay, and if possible defeat" the U.S. military intervention in a Taiwan contingency are supposedly based upon a combination of assets including a substantial submarine force, a fleet of fourth-generation aircraft, a variety of air-to-surface, ship-to-ship, and ballistic missiles with terminal guidance capability, and an array of coastal defense measures. How effective they will be—even if the Chinese press often said they are—is a moot question.

All in all, it is imperative that the PLA's force modernization and its military posture are to be assessed on a regular and objective basis. China's stated emphasis on regional stability and a "responsible great power" (*fuzeren de daguo*) is one thing, and its realpolitik behavior based on hard-nosed national interests could be quite another. China's future force build-up will also be a function of mixed factors such as Chinese leaders' perceptions of its own security environment, the availability of domestic and foreign sources, and internal/bureaucratic constraints. Future trends in China's defense resources allocation—which will be largely affected by the 12th Plan beginning in 2011—would be a good indicator for the priority acquisitions of further submarine force or a new aircraft carrier project.

South Korea's Security Concerns

The three most fundamental and longer-term questions in the ROK's diplomatic and security relations with China are: a) In light of the U.S.'s role and influence in regional and peninsular security and of China's growing importance to the ROK, how best to cope with its alliance with the U.S. and its cooperation with China? b) How can the ROK reconcile its needs for cooperation with China and, at the same time, its potentially conflictual issues with China—e.g., the Korean unification, the Koguryo historical issue,

⁸ It is a dated yet still prescient observation. See Jonathan D. Pollack, "The Changing Political-Military Environment: China," in Zalmay Khalilzad et al., *The United States and Asia: Toward a New U.S. Strategy and Force Posture* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), pp. 137-61.

⁹ "Anti-access strategy" is a term coined by the U.S. military. First appeared in the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) Report, it was mentioned more than 17 times in total in the latest version. U.S. Office of Secretary of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Office of Secretary of Defense, February 2010). See also U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), *The People's Liberation Army Navy: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics* (Washington, DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, August 2009).

and North Korean residents in China? and c) What role would China play in the future of North Korea (DPRK) and of the Korean Peninsula? In a barrage of South Korean newspaper articles and commentaries regarding China's positions and attitude toward the *Cheonan* sinking, one may ask this critical question: "Would China behave the same way once the unification process begins as it did in the *Cheonan* crisis?"

China's "military rise" is an issue of security concern to the ROK; but it is more of an indirect and longer-term nature. The use of military power is a policy means to achieving political objectives and transpires under particular conditions and circumstances only. Of all factors that affect the ROK's calculations the geostrategic and historical considerations remain most enduring and consequential. First, the peninsula is not only located closest to China's capital but also shares a 1,400-kilometer (880-mile) land border with it. Furthermore, Chinese strategists often regard the peninsula as a "route" between the maritime and continental powers. Second, it is also in this peninsula that the fledgling PRC fought with the U.S. 60 years ago. Before that, historical rivalry between China and Japan over the peninsula and the West Sea (Yellow Sea) also illustrates the strategic importance of the peninsula. Third, the fast growing economic ties between Beijing and Seoul testify the vicissitude of Cold-War politics and the validity of China's ongoing reform and opening drive. Fourth, not only was traditional Korea part of the Sinocentric world order but China's potential to become a full-fledged major power will likely be tested again in this peninsula.

More specifically, China's operational SSNs and SSBNs are not only harbored in the North Sea Fleet and mostly patrol in the West Sea (Yellow Sea) and East China Sea. China's future carrier battle groups, once they become operational, would likely be located in the vicinity of the peninsula. China's increasing number of modernized combat aircraft as well as of conventional missiles needs to be reckoned with, even if they are not necessarily targeted at the peninsula. More immediate concern should be given to the PLA's RRF. At the present estimate, seven out of the PLA's 18 group armies (GAs) are RRU's, of which four are located in the Beijing (38th and 27th), Shenyang (39th), and Jinan (54th) MRs. In light of the past patterns of China's use of force in a diplomatic crisis, they will certainly be taken into account in a North Korean contingency.

Policy Recommendations and Some Concluding Observations

South Korea is a genuine middle power by any definition. Given its geographical location as well as its neighboring major powers, however, it is a relatively weaker power. To overcome its continuing plight, there are only two ways: "internal balancing" or "external balancing." The object of the latter should have a) no territorial ambitions; b) a will and capability to assist in time of crisis; and c) a proven historical record to be a benign power. That the only country which meets the three conditions is the United States is a grim reality. Besides, it is imperative to ponder over that how South Korea emerged as a major economic power with its enhanced international stature during the Cold War. The essence of its external balancing is therefore to maintain a rock-solid relationship with the United States.

China's "military rise" will continue to influence the current ROK and future Korea's security environment. In addition to military considerations, therefore, the ROK should work for the improvement of overall bilateral ties and pave the way for an eventual unification. As long as China's future positions and role in the peninsula remain uncertain, the ROK must simultaneously pursue toward China both "exchange and cooperation" and "anticipation and preparation" in case China changes its current course of "peace and development." A hedging strategy will remain the most reasonable approach for the foreseeable future.

On the military side the ROK's force modernization based on the principle of "limited defense sufficiency" should continue. It means, among others, a minimum defense capability to deter and deny military provocations and to respond to small-scale conflict on and near the peninsula. In the near term, it should be able to cope with maritime conflict on top of the existing military threat from North Korea. In the mid- and longer term it calls for a capability to deny or raise the cost of military provocations, which depends upon a more independent intelligence-gathering capability, effective naval and air power, and a high-tech force. When and if China's "benign and reliable" policy is not forthcoming and in particular it becomes a more dominant power with a campaign-level fighting capability, the ROK cannot but further strengthen its defense ties with the United States. It is highly likely that the closer the ROK-U.S. alliance relations, more favorable it will be for the ROK in terms of China's overall posture toward itself. This should be a testable hypothesis.