

Perceptions of the Chinese Military Buildup and its Regional Implications

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This paper looks at current assessments of China's military development from a US and broader perspective and addresses the prospects for Chinese military intervention in North Korea. It also looks at how China's military rise impacts regional security dynamics including US/ROK relations with Japan and other treaty allies. It closes with a brief assessment of the potential collision course being charted by the PLA as it appears to be expanding its definition of "core interests" to include the South China Sea and Yellow Sea, thus putting itself in direct conflict with two vital US national security objectives: defense of its interests/allies and maintaining freedom of the seas.

This paper will not provide order of battle information or otherwise give a military assessment of China's actual strengths and weaknesses relative to its neighbors or the US. This is beyond the competence of this author. Instead, I will focus more on perceptions and the implication of real and perceived policies and practices that appear to have emanated out of Beijing's increased economic and military self-confidence, especially in the wake of its successful hosting of the 2008 Olympics and Beijing's relatively quick recovery from the global financial crisis.

What are current assessments of China's military development?

Assessments of China's military development vary widely, both in the US and throughout the Asia-Pacific region. For the most part, however, US military analysts are more concerned with Chinese potential and the shadow it is casting over its neighbors than its actual capabilities, which still remain several decades behind the US and its more advanced allies. For example, China is just today exploring the possibility of developing aircraft carriers, probably along the line of the old Soviet vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) platforms that cast fear into the hearts of very few (other than the Russian pilots operating off their flight decks) during the Cold War. Yet we already hear people talking of the new threat posed by Chinese aircraft carriers as if they were months away from some form of operational capability.

The truth is, the Peoples Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN) is probably a good decade away from fielding its first carrier and it will take longer than that to perfect carrier battle group operations including a multi-dimensional defensive shield that will make its carrier anything other than a very nice target. As former US Pacific Command commander Admiral Tim Keating once responded in response to a question about what he had to say to the Chinese about their carrier aspirations: "I wish them good luck; it's a lot harder than it looks." This is not to demean Chinese military capabilities. They have some units that are very proficient. But conducting combined naval-air carrier battle group

operations is no easy task and it will be at least a decade or more before Beijing is able to fleet up a credible force. Even then, it will be little match for the US Navy.

The Chinese have also significantly modernized their air forces in recent years, buying the best that Moscow has to offer. But it is important to realize that Moscow does not offer its best and there are few other sources for modern avionics, especially with the European arms embargo (instituted after Tiananmen) still intact. This will no doubt be lifted at some point (although it is not an easy chore since it requires unanimous EU agreement to change the policy) but even then it is doubtful that the most modern weaponry (air force or otherwise) will be offered to Beijing. One suspects that the primary reason Beijing wants to embargo lifted is not in anticipation of access to more modern western military technology but to gain a better bargaining position with Moscow.

The Chinese military does loom large in terms of quantity, if not quality, and also in comparison to almost all of its neighbors (other than the two that count the most: Japan and India, both of whom have militaries that can hold their own against China, especially at sea and in the air). The PLA does of course have the ability, by sheer numbers alone, to engulf any potential land invader, but no one to my knowledge has any plans to launch such an invasion, so the real assessment remains centered on Beijing's power projection capabilities, which have improved markedly but still remain a generation or more behind the US and its western allies, who are also increasing their defensive capabilities in response to China's modernization efforts.

Of most concern has been China's apparent muscle flexing in the past few years especially in the South China Sea, where it is attempting to gain acceptance of its dotted line claim to the entire region, presumably based on 14th century maps and the discovery of Chinese pottery on some of the contested islands in the South China Sea (also claimed and in some cases occupied by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, along with rival Chinese claimant, Taiwan). Chinese harassment of US naval surveillance ships operation in the vicinity of Hainan Island garnered lots of attention last year, although this resulted in the US reminding China that the region remains international waters where it can – and does – exercise its rights to freedom of navigation.

Here Chinese muscle-flexing has actually worked to Beijing's disadvantage, causing many of the ASEAN claimants to rally around the US, silently (and in some cases openly) applauding Secretary of State Clinton's offer to help mediate in this area (an offer Beijing has dismissed as meddling, but which has reassured the other claimants and helped to emphasize in their eyes the importance of the continued presence of the US Seventh Fleet (based in Japan). Chinese naval maneuvers in and around southern Japan and Okinawa have likewise served as incentive (or at least a convenient and believable excuse) for then-Prime Minister Hatoyama to hide behind when he decided to face reality and reverse his stand on the Okinawa base issue (although not before his indecisiveness contributed to his inevitable downfall).

What are the prospects for Chinese military intervention in North Korea?

This question is very scenario dependent, but as a general statement, I would say that the prospects for a Chinese military intervention into North Korea are very slim, even in the case of chaos in the North, provided the US and ROK armies did not begin marching toward Seoul. If that should happen, I would argue that the prospects of Chinese military intervention would actually go down, but concern about such a move prompting the opposite response will likely deter Washington and Seoul for contemplating such a move. I think both sides are more interested in keeping the other out than they are of going in themselves.

In the event of chaos in the North caused by the collapse of the current (or any future Kim-led) regime, the PLA's primary role is likely to be one of keeping North Korean refugees in the North. While it is possible this might result in some limited cross border actions, it will most likely be defensively oriented on the Chinese side of the border. Likewise, efforts by ROK or, more likely, US Special Forces to secure North Korean nuclear materials in the event of chaos, are not likely to draw a PLA military response or be used as the pretext for a Chinese invasion. Of course, serious dialogue between the US/ROK and Chinese would be helpful in further reducing the prospects of misunderstanding or counter-productive actions on the part of either side.

Should the North attack the South, then I think all bets are off and one must assume that the ROK and US will ultimately move north for a final solution. In such a case, I believe the Chinese, while perhaps providing some clandestine support or advice, will stay out of the fray, understanding that Pyongyang has doomed itself. I see the prospects of a North Korean invasion as slim because Pyongyang no doubt understands this or, at best, is not willing to bet its life on Chinese assistance, and must realize that without outside help, any such action is doomed to fail. There are, of course, other scenarios that one can envision – limited attack followed by call for truce, etc. – but those go beyond the primary focus of this discussion, which is Chinese military intervention into North Korea.

For my perspective, the greatest threat posed to North Korea by China is not a PLA invasion; it is the fear that China will buy North Korea, not invade it. By this I mean that Chinese economic inroads will become so pervasive that the North, especially if it begins some form of reform and opening up, will become increasingly dependent on China to the extent that China will be able to affect (although not likely dictate) its future behavior. This is not necessarily a bad thing, given Pyongyang's behavior today, but has to be troubling to Seoul nonetheless.

How does China's military rise impact regional security dynamics including US/ROK relations with Japan?

I think the current administrations in both Seoul and Tokyo view China as a threat, but the context varies significantly, as does the role of the PLA in the respective national calculations. As noted above, I think Seoul is more concerned about China's economic and political influence over the North than it is the PLA threat. This is not the case with

Japan, which seems as concerned about China's military capabilities – especially its missile and nuclear capabilities – than do Koreans in general (progressive or conservative).

This was borne out during a series of meetings conducted separately by the Pacific Forum with both Japanese and Korea security specialists focused on US extended deterrence. Japanese were at least as concerned about China as about North Korea and worried about China's missile capabilities and its ability to become a peer competitor of the US if Washington and Moscow reduced their nuclear arsenals too quickly or without some assurance from Beijing that it would not expand to meet the other shrinking inventories. No such concerns were apparent among ROK specialists, who worried first, last, and almost exclusively about North Korea when it came to US extended deterrence.

Likewise, in the category of unintended consequences, it is North Korea that has played a major role in bringing Seoul and Tokyo together in the wake of the Cheonan attack. Many in Washington, witnessing the Hatoyama government's attitudes toward the alliance and toward greater multilateralism in Asia, were initially concerned that this would result in a softer policy toward Pyongyang as well. But Tokyo has held firm, working hard and closely with Seoul at the UNSC to obtain a stronger resolution. The new Kan administration has been equally intent on moving closer to Seoul, witness the significant breakthrough (which seems to have gone unnoticed by most) when Japanese observers participated in the US/ROK East Sea show of force against Pyongyang.

The greatest regional impact of China's perceived rise centers around US responses to Chinese claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea and Yellow Sea as "coastal waters." Here there is some good news and some potentially bad news. The good news centers around Secretary Clinton's afore-mentioned "meddling" in the South China Sea which sent a useful message to China that it is pushing its territorial claims too far and too hard and that the US is prepared to push back. My discussions with security specialists in Southeast Asia indicates that the reaction to Secretary Clinton's "good offices" offer were well received and highly appreciated.

The US South China Sea pronouncement may have also helped to counter a growing (mis)perception that the US is prepared to yield to Chinese "territorial integrity," "sovereignty," and "core interest" demands, based on its failure – at least thus far (an important caveat) – to send a carrier or other major surface combatants into the Yellow Sea after China vigorously protested against US/ROK exercises in the vicinity of its coastal waters. Nonetheless, the vigorous. Public nature of China's demands and the growing perception in the region that the US is somehow yielding to Beijing's protests in the name of better Sino-US relations, in my view, compels Washington to conduct a major show of force in the West/Yellow Sea, sooner rather than later, to remove any lingering perceptions that it is yielding to PLA might or demands.

US-China relations: on a collision course?

Allow me to go beyond my initial tasking and end with a few comments on broader Sino-US relations caused by China's expanded "core interest" claims. US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao, during their summit meeting in Beijing in November 2009, "reiterated that they are committed to building a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive U.S.-China relationship for the 21st century." They further pledged to "take concrete actions to steadily build a partnership to address common challenges" and to "take concrete steps to advance sustained and reliable military-to-military relations in the future." Since that time, military-to-military relations have floundered and the partnership has become less positive and at times basically non-cooperative; more importantly, the prospects for further deterioration seem high.

From a Chinese perspective, continuing US arms sales to Taiwan are at the heart of the problem and the direct cause of the breakdown in military-to-military relations. But Beijing's inclination to protect its "close as lips to teeth" neighbor North Korea, despite its open flaunting of United Nations Security Council resolutions and, most recently, its violation of the 1953 Armistice Agreement, could have a deeper and more lasting impact on bilateral strategic trust.

This is not to imply that the two sides are about to come to blows or that a genuinely hostile relationship is about to be formed. The two sides seem intent on managing their disagreements and continue to seek common ground on important strategic issues. But, if, as Presidents Obama and Hu stated last November at their Beijing summit, "the two countries believe to nurture and deepen bilateral strategic trust is essential to US-China relations in the new era," then clearly more must be done to overcome current distrust and suspicions. Otherwise, today's "marriage of convenience" between Washington and Beijing – my description, not theirs – will never be transformed into the true strategic partnership both sides profess to seek.

As noted above, the Chinese point to Washington as the primary source of current problems. At the November 2009 summit, both sides agreed that "respecting each other's core interests is extremely important to ensure steady progress in US-China relations." For the Chinese, "core interests" means Taiwan and Tibet. In the joint statement, both agreed that "respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity" was at the core of the bilateral relationship and China further stated that "the Taiwan issue concerns China's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

The Obama administration's decision, shortly after the Beijing meeting, to approve an arms sale package to Taiwan and President Obama's subsequent one-on-one meeting with the Dalai Lama were both seen by Beijing as violating this pledge to respect one another's core interests, even though President Obama reportedly informed President Hu during his Beijing visit that both events would take place.

From a US perspective, the arms sales agreement was nothing new but merely a partial completion of the 2001 arms agreement negotiated and approved by the George W. Bush

administration; Washington continues to follow a “one China” policy and opposes any effort by either side to unilaterally change the status quo. The Dalai Lama meeting was also “business as usual.” As have other presidents before him, President Obama met with the Dalai Lama as a religious leader. The US position is clear: the US continues to recognize Tibet as an integral part of China. As a result, China’s “sovereignty and territorial integrity” are not being challenged or otherwise threatened. From Washington’s perspective, it is the Chinese reaction, not the American action, that makes this an issue.

While Beijing has been clear in expressing its core interests, Washington has been less clear in expressing what its core interests are. However, countering proliferation is clearing on the list. As the 2010 US National Security Strategy (NSS) report states, “This Administration has no greater responsibility than the safety and security of the American people. And there is no greater threat to the American people than weapons of mass destruction, particularly the danger posed by the pursuit of nuclear weapons by violent extremists and their proliferation to additional states.”

North Korea and Iran are the only two states specifically mentioned in the NSS in terms of countering this nuclear proliferation threat. China has traditionally been seen as less than cooperative when it comes to dealing with Iran, but has been generally praised in the past for its assistance in attempting, through the Beijing-hosted Six-Party Talks, to bring about the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Regrettably, this latter perception is beginning to change; when it comes to North Korea today, China more and more appears to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution, in an area where its core interests are less directly challenged as compared to those of Washington and its Northeast Asia allies in Tokyo and especially Seoul.

The South’s concerns center on possible future acts of aggression if North Korea reaches the conclusion that its own nuclear weapons capability now serves as a deterrent protecting it from harsh international reaction to acts of aggression. Washington’s concerns echo Seoul’s but go further and deeper. North Korea is one of the very few potential sources both of technical know-how and of plutonium or other radioactive material desired by international terrorist organizations seeking a rudimentary nuclear weapons or “dirty bomb” capability. Keeping such materials out of the hands of terrorists is, as indicated above, a core US national security interest. If Pyongyang reaches the conclusion that Beijing will protect it from censure or punishment regardless of how egregious its actions, the likelihood of proliferation goes up.

Unlike the case with previous administrations – remember Clinton’s “butchers of Beijing” and Bush’s “strategic competitor” admonitions – Sino-US relations were generally upbeat when the Obama administration came to power; China was simply (and thankfully) not an issue during the 2008 US presidential campaign. The Obama administration saw this as an opportunity to take US-China relations to the next level. A year or so later, Chinese reluctance to have a true strategic dialogue and its willingness to continue to sacrifice improved military-to-military relations with the US for political and

symbolic purposes have resulted in a lowering of expectations as to what can be accomplished or how strategic a relationship can be achieved.

While Washington still respects China's core interests when it comes to Tibet and Taiwan, China's current stance in protecting the DPRK appears to be increasingly putting US core interests at risk. This will make it increasingly more difficult to build a "positive, cooperative, and comprehensive U.S.-China relationship for the 21st century."

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